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## KRṢṢNA AND THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

( A Bibliographical Essay )

By

ALF HILTEBEITEL

Although there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the *Mahābhārata* in the last thirty years, recent studies are fragmented both topically and geographically. The hope of this essay is to bring some clarity and order to this situation by tracing the major interpretative approaches to the epic from the early history of epic studies to the present. Such an overview is needed for many reasons. For one thing, certain recent scholars have all too smugly dissociated themselves from the “ mistakes ” of the past. Secondly, there is a real and lamentable gulf of communication between Indian scholars and Western scholars. And thirdly, no one has written an overview of the history of *Mahābhārata* interpretation since Vishnu S. Sukthankar.<sup>1</sup>

The present essay will not attempt quite so ambitious a task as a full history of *Mahābhārata* criticism. Were it to do so, much of the discussion would necessarily be a rehash of remarks by others.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the attempt here will be to sharpen and freshen the focus by discussing *Mahābhārata* studies in relation to how they have treated the figure of Kṛṣṇa. It is my view that the study of the *Mahābhārata* requires both an attunement to the text as literature and to its subject matter as religious. Most scholars, however, would never have admitted that their “ literary ” studies of the epic were

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<sup>1</sup> Vishnu S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (lectures originally delivered 1942, published posthumously ; Bombay ; Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957 ), pp. 1-31 ( “ The Mahābhārata and its Critics ” ). Norbert Klaes, *Conscience and Consciousness : Ethical Problems of Mahābhārata* ( Delhi : Dharmaram Publications, 1975 ), pp. 1-14, gives a rather rapid overview of early scholarship. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, reviewing J. A. B. van Buitenen’s translation of the *Ādi* through *Āraṇyakaparvans*, in *Religious Studies Review* 4, 1 ( 1978 ), pp. 19-28, provides an excellent overview of recent research.

<sup>2</sup> See Theodore Goldstücker, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Goldstücker* ( 2 Vols.; London : W. H. Allen, 1879 ), Vol. 2, pp. 86-114; Adolf Holtzmann, *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile* ( 4 Vols.; Kiel : C. F. Haesler, 1892-1895 ), Vol. IV, pp. 165-204; Auguste Barth, review of Joseph Dahlmann’s *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch* in *Journal des Savants* ( 1897 ), in three parts : pp. 221-236 ( April ), 321-337 ( June ), and 428-449 ( July )—see especially Part I; Garrett Jan Held, *The Mahābhārata : An Ethnological Study* ( London ; Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1935 ), pp. 1-26.

laden with religious and theological presuppositions. It makes an instructive chapter in the history of ideas to examine the varied Indian and Western responses to these inextricable questions : what is this literary immensity ? and who is Kṛṣṇa ?<sup>3</sup>

#### A. 60 Years of German Hegemony

Although the *Mahābhārata*, mainly through some of its more famous portions, was known to the scholarly world since the 1770's and 80's,<sup>4</sup> it was only in the works of a number of German scholars that it began to provoke critical comment, to stimulate research, and to elicit "theories". Taking stock of the printing of the Calcutta Edition of the *Mahābhārata* ( 1834-39 ), the first to assess the epic as a whole was Christian Lassen, beginning with a series of articles that were followed up in his much reprinted book *Indische Altertumskunde*.<sup>5</sup> His primary interest lay in reconstructing Indian geography, ethnology, and prehistory on the basis of the epic, and in so doing, he took the names of certain personages and presented them as symbolic of tribes and ethnic movements. "Thus Pāṇḍu ( literally, ' pale, white ' ) was not a

<sup>3</sup> Other similar areas of scholarship have produced some comparable interpretations. For discussions of Homeric scholarship, which has produced its own inversionists, unitarians, analysts, ethnologies, and elaborate handlings of mythology, see M. Platnauer, *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship* ( Oxford, 1954 ); Sir John L. Myres, *Homer and His Critics*, Dorothea D. Gray, ed. ( London : Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958 ); J. A. Davison, " The Homeric Question," in Alan J. B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings, eds., *A Companion to Homer* ( New York : Macmillan, 1963 ), pp. 234-265; Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* ( Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1958 ), pp. 1-16; Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer ( London : Oxford University Press, 1963 ), pp. 1-21. For an instructive bibliographical discussion of another non-Western religious figure, see Jacques Duchesne Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* ( 1958; repr. Westport, Ct. : Greenwood Press, 1973 ).

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion of early translations of portions of the epic in Holtzmann, *Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, IV, 165-204. Horace Hayman Wilson, " Introduction to the Mahābhārata," *Essays on Sanskrit Literature*, ed. Reinhold Rost ( 2 Vols.; London : Trübner and Co., 1864 ), pp. 277, ends prophetically ( actually writing in 1842 ) : " By these means, the merits, both poetical and historical, of the Mahābhārata are becoming more extensively known; but in the amplitude of its extent, in the numerous legends and tales which it contains, and in its many didactic and philosophical passages, it offers an accumulation of materials adapted to different tastes, and auxiliary to diverging researches, which must long advantageously engage the attention, and reward the industry, of Sanskrit scholars. " ( p. 290 ).

<sup>5</sup> Christian Lassen, " Beitrage zur Kunde des Indischen Alterthum aus dem Mahābhārata," " *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Vol. I ( 1837 ), Part 1, " Allgemeines über des Mahābhārata," pp. 61-86; Part 2, " Die Altindischer Völker," pp. 341-53, continued Vol. II ( 1839 ), pp. 21-70 and Vol. III ( 1840 ), pp. 183-217. Lassen's *Indische Altertumskunde* is found in three editions, most recently in 4 Vols. ; Osnabrück : Otto Zeller, 1968, which I have used. See Vol. I, Part 2, pp. 733-857 on the *Mahābhārata*.

person, but was originally the name of a royal family of the 'white race,' which had migrated into India from the north and which was later known in Sanskrit as Arjuna (literally, 'white'). Pāṇḍu would thus represent the most ancient period of the history of the family and Arjuna the later."<sup>6</sup> In this vein, he also sought an explanation of the identity of Kṛṣṇa. First, in 1837, he proposed of Pāṇḍu and Kṛṣṇa, "White" and "Black", "dass sie auf die beiden in Indiens Urzeit sich bekämpfenden Racen zu deuten sind, die ursprünglich einheimische schwarze und die von Norden eingewanderte, Sanskrit-redende, hellfarbige", comparing this to the American Indian conflict between white men and red men.<sup>7</sup> Such a conflict is, of course, sheer supposition, and Lassen soon modified his interpretation, calling attention to the Pāṇḍavas' connections with not just one Kṛṣṇa, but two. The second is the proper name (given, of course, in the feminine form) of Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas' wife-in-common. Now Lassen stresses alliance rather than conflict.<sup>8</sup> Noting that Kṛṣṇā-Draupadī's people, the Pāṇḍavas, must be characterized as Aryan, he proposes that the colours signify "dass die Pāṇḍāla, wie die Yādava, die durch Kṛṣṇa vertreten werden, beide zu den früher eingewanderten Arischen Völkern gehörten, durch den Einfluss des Klimas [!] dunkelfarbiger geworden waren, als die jüngsten Einwanderer aus dem Norden, und im Gegensatze zu diesen schwarzen genannt worden sind."<sup>9</sup> Kṛṣṇa is thus the symbolic representative, "der Vertreter," of his people, and although Lassen sometimes speaks of some of stories concerning him as having historical value, it seems that he regards him as a legendary rather than a historical figure.

These conjectural flights do not, however, prevent Lassen from offering a more down to earth look at the textual traditions about Kṛṣṇa. He doubts the unity of the *Mahābhārata* text, and suggests that "didaktische und dogmatische Stücke" like the *Bhagavad Gītā* are interpolations.<sup>10</sup> He notices Kṛṣṇa's double connections with warriors and cattle folk, and proposes: "In der ältern Sage ist er der Vertreter der Geschichte seines Volkes von Seiten seines kriegerischen Charakters und seines ursprünglichen Hirtenlebens."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of Mahābhārata*, p. 26, summarizing Lassen's position and rejecting it; see Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde*, Vol. I, pp. 781-782.

<sup>7</sup> Lassen, "Allgemeines über das Mahābhārata," p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde*, Vol. I, p. 790.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 791; this notion of the Pāṇḍavas as a relatively more recent party than the Kauravas accords with and anticipates the theories of Holtzmann and Hopkins, discussed below.

<sup>10</sup> Lassen, "Allgemeines über das Mahābhārata," p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde*, p. 770; Balarāma-Halāyudha supposedly represents the agricultural side of the Yādavas' history before their settlement in Dvārakā; *ibid.*, p. 768.

It is thus not a matter of two Kṛṣṇas, but of two layers ( the pastoral one the more ancient ) of one tradition about him. Lassen also raises the question of Kṛṣṇa's double nature as both heroic and divine, and suggests that through his many deeds as a Yādava hero, he was "frühe verherrlicht und später vergöttert"<sup>12</sup>, his divinization occurring in post-Buddhist times.<sup>13</sup> And he addresses himself to the problems raised by some of the many names which Kṛṣṇa assumes in the epic, being the first to suggest, for instance, that the name Vāsudeva is not patronymic deriving from any real father Vasudeva, but that the latter name was made up.<sup>14</sup> In nearly all of these cases Lassen is laying important groundwork for further study of the epic Kṛṣṇa.

From shortly after Lassen's work began until late in the last decade of the nineteenth century, *Mahābhārata* studies were dominated by the theories of the two Adolf Holtzmans, the former paternal uncle to the latter. Both were intent upon exposing and rooting out what they felt were the poem's contradictions. The elder Holtzmann as early as 1846 had proposed that an original version of the epic must have attributed "Recht und Tugend" to the side of Duryodhana, and that later revisers, favouring the new god Viṣṇu, would have reshaped the poem through their effort to exonerate the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa of all guilt for their nefarious activities.<sup>15</sup> The original Kṛṣṇa was thus a deceitful propounder of immoral advice whose so-called peace mission actually hastened the war. These points were picked up by the younger Holtzmann, and the combined effort came to be christened the "inversion theory."

In the nephew's more elaborated version, a chronology is developed to account for such transformations of the poem. The epic began, says the younger Holtzmann, as the work of court singers whose profession it was to

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 770.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 823; cf. Theodor Pavie, "Études sur l'Inde ancienne et moderne," Part 4, "Kṛichna, ses aventures et ses adorateurs," *Revue des deux mondes*, XIII ( 1858 ), pp. 50-52.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 764. From here on, Lassen's explanations differ from later ones which assume a fictitious Vasudeva, Lassen interpreting it as "Gott der Vasu" and linking Vāsudeva with Vāsava (*idem*). Among many who have assumed a spurious Vasudeva, see R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Minor Religious Systems* ( Strassburg, 1913; repr. Benares : Indological Book House, 1965 ), p. 11; Charlotte Vaudeville, "Aspects du mythe de Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla dans l'Inde ancienne," *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* ( Paris : Editions E. de Boccard, 1968 ), p. 746.

<sup>15</sup> Adolf Holtzmann [ elder ], *Indische Sagen*, Vol. II, *die Kurusage*, "Vorrede" ( Karlsruhe, 1846 ), pp. vii and viii.

extol past monarchs, presumably historical ones like Duryodhan<sup>16</sup> and unlike the Pāṇḍavas, whose polyandry indicates that they could not have originally been from a royal line.<sup>17</sup> Then, at a time of heightened nationalism (note the assumption of a "national epic"), a poet would have fashioned the work into a glorification of his patron, the nation's king. Holtzmann claims that these criteria are best met by the period from Candragupta to Aśoka, and he urges the view that at the time of Aśoka, the memory of national resistance to the Greeks would have provided a court poet with the inspiration to depict Duryodhana in the image of the great Buddhist king.<sup>18</sup> This original Buddhist poem would then have been subjected to three revisions, all Brāhmanical. In the first, Duryodhana's party would still have been favoured, and Karṇa, worshipper of the "old" god Sūrya, would have taken on his position as the most noble hero.<sup>19</sup> Then, motivated by the cult of the "new god" Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas would have taken over the favourite's role from the Kurus, and Duryodhana's former association with Buddhism would come to be disguised in his depiction as a "Ketzer und Zauberer" (heretic and magician) whose new associations were with Rākṣasas, Dānavas, Daityas, and Cārvākas (materialists).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, various confusions and associations between Buddhism and Śaivism would gradually have facilitated the identification of the Kurus as the party of Śiva.<sup>21</sup> And finally, there would be further revision, ending as late as the twelfth century A. D., in which the epic would be assimilated to the chronology and theology of the Purāṇas.<sup>22</sup> This stratification of epic brahmanization rests on Holtzmann's designation of Indra and Brahman as "old gods" (along with Sūrya and others), and Viṣṇu and Śiva as new gods;<sup>23</sup> and it expressly rejects any meaningful connection between the Viṣṇu of the Vedic hymns and the Viṣṇu with whom Kṛṣṇa is identified in the epic.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On historicity, see Adolf Holtzmann [younger], *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile* (see n. 2), Vol. I, *Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata*, pp. 41–42 and 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104–106; he notes for one thing the similar birth stories of the two kings, both born with a hundred brothers.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94 and 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109; on the Cārvāka episode, see *Mbh.* 12.89 (Critical Edition).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119, 126.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–96, especially p. 194 (dating).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; see Holtzmann's earlier studies: "Indra nach den Vorstellungen des Mahābhārata," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* [henceforth referred to as *ZDMG*] 32 (1878), pp. 290–340; "Brahman in Mahābhārata," *ZDMG* 38 (1884), pp. 167–234.

<sup>24</sup> Holtzmann, *Das Mahābhārata und Seine Theile*, Vol. I, p. 133.

Holtzmann's chronology has long been discredited,<sup>25</sup> and the notion of an original Buddhist composition of the poem rests on the flimsiest of assumptions. But the concept of inversion is intriguing, for, even by historicizing it, the theory holds up to examination the essentially paradoxical and often ambiguous character of much of the poem. And right at the crux of the matter is Kṛṣṇa, "dessen Charakter für die innere Kritik des ganzen Epos wohl der wichtigste ist."<sup>26</sup> It is through the "ungeheuerliche Identification,"<sup>27</sup> the monstrous identification, of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu, that the inversion takes place : Kṛṣṇa as the incarnation of the highest god is the standpoint of the new poem from which the enemies of the Pāṇḍavas are recast as villains.<sup>28</sup> Originally, Kṛṣṇa was probably a deified tribal hero of a non-brahmanical people with a taste for drunkenness and sensuality,<sup>29</sup> and his role in the "old epic" as Lehrer to his Schuler ( i.e. , the Pāṇḍavas ) was to give crafty and dishonourable advice to the more ignoble party.<sup>30</sup> "What demon tormented the reviser" ( welcher Damon hat die Uebersetzer geblagt ) into making this popular but disreputable figure into the prototype of all virtue, even the incarnation of the highest god?<sup>31</sup> The answer : a thoroughly pragmatic decision on the part of the Brahmans ( who had already taken over the poem from the Buddhists ) to use the popularity of this figure as a means to combat Buddhism through a Verschmelzung of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva with Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.<sup>32</sup>

There are points where Holtzmann's theory reaches into the absurd : for instance, his suggestion that the original *Gītā* was spoken by Droṇa.<sup>33</sup> But the notion of inversion did win adherents who modified it and smoothed over some of the difficulties.<sup>34</sup> And the theory does at least have the merits

<sup>25</sup> See Barth, review of Dahlmann ( cited above, n. 2 ), Part 1, p. 227; Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp 8-9; Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 15. All cite the important work of Georg Bühler and Johann Kirste, "Indian Studies, No. I: Contributions to the History of the Mahābhārata," *Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-Historische Classe*, 126, Abhandlung 11 ( 1892 ), pp. 26-27, 56-58, which established a terminal date of 400 A. D. for the epic as a near certainty.

<sup>26</sup> Holtzmann, *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, Vol. I, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14; cf. p. 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 81, 86.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> *Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, Vol. II, *Die Neunzehn Bücher des Mahābhārata*, p. 164.

<sup>34</sup> See Leopold von Schroeder, *Indiens Literatur und Cultur in Historischer Entwicklung* ( Leipzig, 1887 ), pp. 479-482, who is reserved on any Buddhist phase and who supposes that the poem was originally by Kuru bards who nostalgically recalled the virtues of their conquered monarchs ( worshippers of Brahmā, a 700 B. C. ) and painted Kṛṣṇa, the god of the conquering invaders ( Yādavas, Pāṇḍavas, Matsyas ), "in the blackest light" ( im schwärzesten Licht, 480 ). Then, when Kṛṣṇa became popular as the highest god and incarnation of Viṣṇu, the poem was remodelled, blame and rebuke now falling on the Kurus.

of recognizing a *pivotal* place for Kṛṣṇa in the “history” of the poem (if not a *central* place in its structure), and of calling attention to significant “inconsistencies” in the characterizations of the two rival factions and their individual heroes.

These merits have been recognized by some of the theory’s critics. But no one has put the matter of inversion into a better perspective than one of them, Hermann Oldenberg. Observing that there are significant parallels between the epic conflict and the Vedic oppositions between gods and Asuras, where the former achieve their triumphs “durch Tücke und Trug,” Oldenberg asks: “will man daraus etwa auf ursprüngliche Parteinahme der priesterlichen Autorten für die Dämonen, auf Umarbeitung des Veda zu Gunsten der Götter schliessen?”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it took a Vedic scholar to point up the real absurdity of such historical reconstructions. Yet, as we shall see, Oldenberg was still unable to perceive any significant relationship between the Vedic Viṣṇu and the epic Kṛṣṇa.<sup>36</sup>

Symbolic migrations and inversions were soon confronted by strange new twists in the theories of Alfred Ludwig and Joseph Dahlmann. The former, a Vedicist and a solar mythologist, provides us with some of the lighter moments in the history of Kṛṣṇa and epic criticism. A new solar drama is envisioned behind the epic tale — a myth which was only gradually anthropomorphized and transformed into an heroic poem when the allegorical meanings had been nearly forgotten.<sup>37</sup>

In his first article, against the background of the “pale” Pāṇḍu receding as the faded former sun, and the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra as the ineffectual, cloud-enveloped winter sun, stand the Pāṇḍavas, the five seasons, and their wife Draupadī, the earth, in opposition to the figure of Duryodhana, “der schwer zu bekämpfende winter.”<sup>38</sup> Favouring the seasons and the earth, one finds Kṛṣṇa, “die junge frühlingssonne, die bei den Pāṇḍava gleichsam die stelle des vaters vertritt.”<sup>39</sup> As the spring sun, Kṛṣṇa may originally have had Karna, the winter sun robbed of his gold earrings and armour (not to be

<sup>35</sup> Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata: Seine Entstehung, sein Inhalt, seine Form* (Gettingen: Bandenhoed & Ruprecht, 1922), p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37; and see below, nn. 137–38.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Ludwig, “Über die mythische grundlage des *Mahābhārata*” *Sitzungsberichte des Königl. Böhmischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften. Classe für Philosophie, Geschichte, und Philologie* (1895), pp. 11 and 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig, “Über das Verhältnis des mythischen elementes zu der historischen grundlage des *Mahābhārata*.” *Abhandlungen der Böhmischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Prague*, 11 (1881), p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15; in fact it is actually not impossible, “eigentlich unabweisbar,” that Kṛṣṇa was the Pāṇḍavas’ original father (p. 16).



confused with the winter sun Dhṛtarāṣṭra ), as his chief opponent.<sup>40</sup> However, there are still enigmas in the notion of “ black ” ( kṛṣṇa ) being the colour of the spring sun. Perhaps “ Kṛṣṇa ” signifies the sun that is not yet immediately effective, in accord with his noncombatant role in aiding the Pāṇḍavas in battle ; or perhaps he represents the spring sun, blackened, as it were, by the ceaseless smoke of sacrificial fires. ... ?<sup>41</sup>

Ludwig continued to elaborate upon these themes in a second article ( 1895 ), undaunted by Holtzmann’s criticism that kings probably did not want to hear bards reciting lengthy veiled allegories about the sun and the moon.<sup>42</sup> If anything, such criticism seems to have made him more ingenious. Now he sees the conflict beginning with Duryodhana’s success in the dice match, a victory signifying not only the triumph of winter, but, in the attempt to disrobe Draupadī, winter’s baring of the earth.<sup>43</sup> And the conflict ends ( Ludwig does not stress the symmetry, but certainly implies it ) with the night raid by Aśvatthāman under Śiva’s protection ( “ Śiva ist evident wintergott ” ) symbolizing “ the last nightfrost in spring ”<sup>44</sup> — followed by the solar triumph and re-enthronement of Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu and the Pāṇḍavas.

Incredible as nearly all of this is ( the only identification with any future is that of Draupadī with the earth ), one must not go too far in discrediting the first scholar to insist on a mythological background to the epic story. Though he has provided his own myth with a distinctly Germanic climatology ( Śiva as a winter god ! ), it is ingenious and even touching. And in presenting it, he has caught something of the cyclical, balanced character of the epic conflict — “ die schilderung der kämpfe im ganzen unparteissch ist ”<sup>45</sup> — including the suggestion of an underlying myth whose two key episodes are the dice match and the night raid. In some respects, we have in these insights an improvement over the Holtzmanns’ inversion theory and an anticipation of later approaches stressing the epic’s mythical structure and atmosphere. Moreover, he senses that the opposition of the two parties has something essential to do with Viṣṇu and Śiva, not something accidental to do with Viṣṇu and the Buddha — again, a step beyond Holtzmann.

To date, all the theorists on the *Mahābhārata* were convinced that the key to its interpretation lay in distinguishing older epic material from younger, in breaking the epic down into its essential and non-essential components. But with the criteria for stratification shifting like sands, this basic approach was open to attack. A most daring response was provided by

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Joseph Dahlmann. In what came to be known as the “synthetic” theory, the *Mahābhārata* appears not as a hodgepodge but as a unity, not as the work of countless hands but of a single “diaskeuast.” This second stance earned Dahlmann a good deal of deprecating criticism,<sup>46</sup> but the claim of a synthetic unity for the *Mahābhārata* has, at least by some, been treated more seriously.<sup>47</sup>

The main argument, as implied in the title of his first book *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch* (1895), is that the epic’s unity lies in an intentional intertwining of the main heroic narrative with didactic material<sup>1</sup> concerning *dharma* and episodic material illustrative of *dharma*. There are no grounds for speaking of an original epic kernel; rather, going in the other direction, the concern with *dharma* (das Recht) provides a “Krystallisationcentrum” for the shaping of the narrative.<sup>48</sup> The epic is a story representing a tragic struggle between two opposed principles, not those of knight-hood versus neue Politik<sup>49</sup> or of Buddhist praise for Kṣatriyas versus Brahmanic revisions (Holtzmann) — or, for that matter, of summer versus winter (Ludwing) — but of *dharma* versus *adharma*.<sup>50</sup> What a breath of fresh air, even with the tendency to see the story itself as secondary to, or built upon, the *Rechtsbuch*. Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana, he argues, represent these two principles consistently (thus opposing Holtzmann’s notion of inconsistencies). And in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, Dahlmann grounds his point not in what a western scholar might judge to be ethical, but in an examination of the king’s devotion to, and representation of, the Indian conception of *dharma* as subtle (*dharmaḥ sūkṣmaḥ*).<sup>51</sup> It is thus not a matter of Yudhiṣṭhira himself having an ‘inconsistent’ character, but of the principle which he represents being subtle and, one might say, ambiguous.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance E. W. Hopkins, “The Bhārata and the Great Bhārata,” *American Journal of Philology*, 19 (1898), pp. 1-24; Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, S. Ketkar, trans. (2 Vols; Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1962), vol. I, p. 277, n. 3.

<sup>47</sup> See Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 19, crediting Dahlmann with coming nearest “of all the foreign critics .. to any real understanding” of the epic; also Barth, review of *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, Part 1, p. 228.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Dahlmann, *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch. Ein Problem aus Altindiens Cultur- und Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Verlag von Felix L. Dames, 1895), pp. 23-27.

<sup>49</sup> See E. W. Hopkins, “The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Class in Ancient India, as Represented in the Sanskrit Epic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (henceforth *JAOS*) 13 (1899), pp. 63ff.

<sup>50</sup> Dahlmann, *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, pp 47-51.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-70. *passim*.

So far Dahlmann wins our agreement, yet his approach has several weaknesses. In effect, the opposition between *dharma* and *adharma* tends to reduce the epic story itself to little more than a morality play. For Dahlmann, the story does not carry its own message. For instance, the tendency to look on the characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira as built around ethical themes has, in the case of *sūkṣmo dharmah* the effect of exonerating him of any blame for his actions and of levelling reproach at the ambiguous concept of *dharma*. But in the *Mahābhārata* narrative itself, there is at many points no hesitancy in attributing a strong measure of blame to Yudhiṣṭhira personally.<sup>52</sup> In this vein, and still more seriously, Dahlmann fails to consider how Yudhiṣṭhira's role as Dharmarāja is continually backed, and given articulation, by Kṛṣṇa. On this oversight, Sukthanakar gives us the appropriate comment :

Dahlmann had no explanation to offer of the paradox of Kṛṣṇa. Strangely enough – or perhaps quite characteristically – Dahlmann entirely overlooked Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Śrī Kṛṣṇa who looms so large in the world of the epic poets as to overshadow the entire poem. ... With his eyes fixed on the dichotomy of *dharma* and *adharma*, the Jesuit Father missed completely the elusive Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the most characteristic creation of Indian genius, who was above *dharma* and *adharma*, beyond Good and Evil.<sup>53</sup>

Strictly speaking, it is not quite fair to say that Dahlmann “entirely overlooked” Kṛṣṇa, but the criticism applies insofar as Dahlmann failed to accord him any important place in the plan of the poem. Following Lassen, he was inclined to see some of the heroes as having originally been representatives of different Volksgruppen, an Arjuna cycle in particular representing the Pāṇḍavas, a Kṛṣṇa cycle the Yādavas.<sup>54</sup> In neither case does he see any evidence for a historical personage,<sup>55</sup> and in Kṛṣṇa's case, no evidence that when he was bound up “mit dem epischen Hauptereigniss” of the Pāṇḍavas, that he was already both a heroic and a divine figure.<sup>56</sup> With regard to the unity of Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa with Nara-Nārāyaṇa, he assumes several unlikely stages of development before the composition of the

<sup>52</sup> See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahābhārata* ( Ithaca, N. Y. : Cornell University Press, 1976 ), pp. 237–296.

<sup>53</sup> Sukthanakar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 24; for a less reasonable attack on Dahlmann's supposed Christian leanings, see E. W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India* ( 1901; reprinted Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1969 ), pp. ix–x.

<sup>54</sup> Dahlmann, *Genesis des Mahābhārata* ( Berlin : Felix L. Dames, 1899 ), pp. 234–235, 260.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262; *idem*, *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, p. 159.

<sup>56</sup> *Idem*, *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, p. 158; *Genesis*, p. 258.

*Mahābhārata* ( for Dahlmann, not later than 500 B. C. ) : ( 1 ) that originally Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa were represented as completely on a par ; ( 2 ) that they were both presented as “ göttliche Wesen,” and were honoured as Bhagavāns; ( 3 ) that as this term came to be associated with Viṣṇu, both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa were “ united ” as incarnations, but with the latter dominant as chief incarnation, the former being drawn into his “ sektarische Sphäre.”<sup>57</sup> A surprise twist is added in *Genesis des Mahābhārata* where Dahlmann suggests that not only was Arjuna’s cycle originally bound up with Indra, but Kṛṣṇa’s as well, and that as Indra’s popularity waned, Kṛṣṇa then came to be identified with Viṣṇu.<sup>58</sup> This view, based on wide-spread assumptions about historical shifts in the popularity of gods, about sects and tendencies toward monotheism, could hardly do justice to an epic whose theology is unquestionably polytheistic. It rests largely on a failure ( shared with Holtzmann and countless others ) to perceive the significance of the “ unpopular ” Viṣṇu of the *Ṛg Veda* and Brāhmaṇas, with whom Kṛṣṇa is certainly connected as much as Arjuna with the Vedic ( and post-Vedic ) Indra.<sup>59</sup>

#### B. *The Hopkins Years : Analysis and Fragmentation*

The counterpart to Dahlmann’s “ synthetic method ” was provided by the “ analytic method ” of America’s greatest *Mahābhārata* scholar, Edward Washburn Hopkins. On matters concerning Kṛṣṇa, however, Hopkins’ long-continuing epic researches<sup>60</sup> did not bear much more fruit than Dahlmann’s. We shall turn later to a rationale which Hopkins provided for Kṛṣṇa’s involvement in the Pāṇḍavas’ sins, but by and large his method of “ analyzing ” the component elements of the epic and his attempts at dating precluded all but the most cursory historicization of Kṛṣṇa’s role. His work represents an effort to reach objective criteria for epic studies by avoiding the pitfalls that had waylaid others ; by refusing, that is, to become attached to, and thus an exponent of, any one facet of the epic’s content or character and thus build a theory upon it. In his studies, the content of the epic is matter in suspension, waiting to be rearranged not in terms of any inner logic or structure ( inverted, mythic, or “ legal ” ) but in terms of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Idem, Epos und Rechtsbuch*, p. 159; *Genesis*, p. 261.

<sup>58</sup> *Idem, Genesis*, p. 261.

<sup>59</sup> Dahlmann did see a significant antiquity in Arjuna and the Pāṇḍavas’ connection with Indra; see *Genesis*, p. 235.

<sup>60</sup> Most important are Hopkins’ “ Ruling Caste ” ( see above, n. 49 ); *Great Epic of India* ( see above, n. 53 ); and *Epic Mythology* ( Strassburg, 1915; repr. New York : Biblo and Tannen, 1969 ). Some of Hopkins’ most interesting work is found in numerous articles and reviews on epic subjects.

meagre historical data at the “analyst’s” disposal and the inevitable personal biases.

Since Dahlmann is the main target of his analytic approach,<sup>61</sup> the “original” narrative and the “brahmanical” didactic portions of the epic are the first things to, once again, be pushed apart :

This story is in its details so abhorrent to the writers of the epic that they make every effort to whitewash the heroes. ... It is not then probable that had the writers intended to write a moral tale they would have built on such material. Hence the tale existed as such before it became the nucleus of a sermon. ...<sup>62</sup>

The subtlety of *dharma* goes once again unacknowledged. Then, reviving Holtzmann’s assumptions about sectarian revisions, Hopkins does little more than dispense with the Buddhist phase and rearrange the chronology :

The earliest tales received into the epic know no god higher than Brahman, the later pseudo-epic knows no god equal to [ the Pāṣupata sect’s ] Śiva. Between the two lies the mass of epic teaching, where supremacy is given to a sectarian Viṣṇu. ...<sup>63</sup>

The sects or cults of Viṣṇu and Śiva, however, are not absent from the early poems, as for Holtzmann. Rather, as the epic develops, they are one after the other “exaggerated.”<sup>64</sup> Thus Duryodhana and the Kurus are no longer connected with Buddhists and Rākṣasas before their associations with Śiva : they are “old Śivaïtes,” along with Jarāsandha.<sup>65</sup> In fact, if we prune away the sectarian assumptions, we may credit Hopkins with another hesitant insight, following Ludwig, into a fundamental complementarity between Viṣṇu and Śiva : “the passages in the earlier books [ citing Arjuna’s reception of boons from Śiva in the *kirāta* episode and his “regular nightly offering” to Śiva—Tryambaka ( 7:56, 3-4 ) ] may indicate that there was not at first much antagonism between the sects. ... Each party believes in the supreme greatness of his own god, but neither decries the other openly.”<sup>66</sup>

But if such a theological complementarity is “early,” there is still no reason for Hopkins to suppose an early relationship between Viṣṇu and

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<sup>61</sup> See the belittling and distasteful review of Dahlmann’s *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, cited above, n. 46.

<sup>62</sup> Hopkins, *Great Epic of India*, p. 363.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184; see *idem*, *Epic Mythology*, p. 204 : “.. the epic in general is an apologia for Viṣṇu as Nārāyaṇa and All-god, either incorporate in Kṛṣṇa or as an independent superior god..”

<sup>64</sup> *Idem*, *Epic Mythology*, p. 220.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213; cf. 219, n. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220; see also p. 221.

Kṛṣṇa. Here we encounter a synthesis of some familiar notions : “ Viṣṇu is first a philosopher’s god, i. e., a priestly god, representing the active yet kindly sun as source of all, and one with the divine light, the best possible god... to absorb the local bucolic divinities, Balarāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, who were never less than demigod chieftains.”<sup>67</sup> He thus upholds, for one thing, the notion of separate tribal origins for different parts of the tale. Not only is Kṛṣṇa a demigod chieftain, but the Pāṇḍavas are “ nouveaux riches ... vulgar upstart[ s ],”<sup>68</sup> polyandrous and non-Brahmanical<sup>69</sup> ( but early Viṣṇuites ? ), perhaps originally a “ second-rate ” branch of the Kuru tribe which raised itself to leadership.<sup>70</sup> Thus, although he will never commit himself to the inversion theory,<sup>71</sup> he agrees with Holtzmann that the Pāṇḍavas are “ white-washed ” and he leaves open the possibility, indeed the probability, that the original tale may not have even concerned them.<sup>72</sup>

All of this sets the stage for what are probably Hopkins’ most influential remarks, those which concern the chronology of epic composition :

We may tentatively assume as approximate dates of the whole work in its different stages : Bhārata ( Kuru ) lays, perhaps combined into one, but with no evidence of an epic before 400 B. C. A Mahābhārata tale with Pāṇḍu heroes, lays and legends combined by the Purāṇic diaskeuasts, Kṛṣṇa as demigod ( no evidence of didactic form or of Kṛṣṇa’s divine supremacy ), 400–200 B. C. Remaking of the epic with Kṛṣṇa as all-god, intrusion of masses of didactic matter, addition of Purāṇic material old and new; multiplication of exploits, 200 B. C. to 100–200 A. D. The last books added with the introduction to the first book, the swollen *Anuśāsana* separated from *Śānti* and recognized as a separate book, 200–400 A. D.; and finally 400 A. D. + : occasional amplifications...<sup>73</sup>

Sukthankar, for whom Hopkins’ atomistic approach is the utmost heresy, says that “ this pretentious table is as good as useless.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it derives no support from the Critical Edition, of which Sukthankar was the general editor. One need not go this far, of course, but it does seem that in matters

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203, n. 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Idem*, “ Ruling Caste, ” p. 64.

<sup>69</sup> *Idem*, *Great Epic of India*, p. 376.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398; see also Hopkins review of Oldenberg’s *Das Mahābhārata* ( cited above, n. 35 ), *JAOS*, 43 ( 1923 ), pp. 54–56.

<sup>72</sup> *Idem*, *Great Epic of India*, p. 385; cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 396–398 and 398, n. 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397–398.

<sup>74</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 9.

concerning the heroes, as distinct from matters concerning accretions to the text and perhaps some of the terminal dates, that Sukthankar is right. And as for the alleged accretions, Hopkins' criteria for interpolations and "pseudo-epic" were all too often idiosyncratic and arbitrary ( see an example discussed below, chap. xvii ).

Finally, as regards Kṛṣṇa, we are confronted by some apparent enigmas. When Hopkins says that Kṛṣṇa was " never less than a demi-god chieftain," this does not rule out an historical identity. In fact, Hopkins gives us our best attempt at an inventory of the incidents where Kṛṣṇa appears with " marks of humanity rather than divinity " : ( 1 ) his " cow-boy manners " before king Jarāsandha at Magadha; ( 2 ) his " ignorance " in battle when he cannot see where Arjuna is ( 7 : 18, 21 ); ( 3 ) his " unreasonable rage " when Arjuna does not fight to his utmost against Bhīṣma, and his " broken promise " when he nearly engages in combat to arouse Arjuna ( 6:55, 86ff. ); ( 4 ) his occasional worship of Umā and Siva; ( 5 ) his powers received from the gods for slaying the asura Naraka ( 5 : 47, 74-81 ); ( 6 ) his admissions of powerlessness in certain instances in battle; ( 7 ) a reference to him as only a " half-quarter " ( *turīyārdha*; 12 : 271, 61 ) of Viṣṇu; ( 8 ) denunciations of him as a deceitful and low person, a cowherd and a coward; ( 9 ) his weakness and despair when plagued by his kin ; and ( 10 ) his fear of Jarāsandha when forced to flee from Mathurā.<sup>75</sup>

It is the last of these points which will present others, in particular Walter Ruben, with the strongest arguments for Kṛṣṇa's historicity and " humanity." But in most of these cases it seems better to recall that Kṛṣṇa's involvements are on the heroic – not the divine – level, and that such " marks of humanity " furnish no proof of a historical, as opposed to a legendary, identity.<sup>76</sup> In fact, Hopkins' criteria for determining history are not only subjective but inane : " It is most improbable," he says, " that the compilers, who made the poem represent Pāṇḍu virtues and victories, would have chosen them for this position had they been mythical...; to appeal to the people something real was necessary."<sup>77</sup> Such an underestimate of myth leaves us wondering what compelled Hopkins to turn to the study of " epic mythology."

Hopkins' work is also instructive for his analytic examination of Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the Pāṇḍavas' sins, a topic handled all to super-

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<sup>75</sup> Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>76</sup> On heroes and heroic ages as not necessarily historical, but as figures and constructs of a *sui generis* mythical character, see Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 27-59.

<sup>77</sup> Hopkins, *Great Epic of India*, p. 399.

ficially by the inversionists. He begins with the following observation: "opposite tendencies seem at work. The highest god is at the same time a tricky mortal. The chief knights are depicted now as good and now as sinful men. The original theme is, as it were, diverted from its course."<sup>78</sup> But to explain this diversion, Hopkins offers what we may call an "inversion theory" of his own, one pertaining to "the lines of growth of Hindu Civilization"; for:

as religion descended, morality ascended; ... the later religious feeling was less simple and less pure than the earlier, but the later morality was higher and stricter.... Consider how penetrated the epic is by this later morality; ... how it condemns the barbarities of an early uncivilized community; ... how it has composed a formal 'code of fighting' that inculcates law more humane than was possibly consistent with the practices of the older times commemorated by the first form of the poem – and then let us ask this question: is it not reasonable to suppose that these same priests who formed the fighting code and endeavored to implant in their brutal warrior kings a moral, not to say a chivalrous sentiment, might have been swayed by two opposing desires in handling down the national Epic?<sup>79</sup>

When these priests were not able to revise everything to suit their scruples, however:

they modified what they could not erase; they excused what they could not pardon; they called in as a last resort the direct command of their deity to justify what to mortal apprehension was unjustifiable.<sup>80</sup>

The whole argument is, of course, rank with unverifiable and biased historical judgments. The inversion of religion and morals, not in itself an absurd notion, is here just a matter of taste, and Hopkins has been taken to task over and over for his conception of an "early uncivilized community" headed by "brutal warrior kings."<sup>81</sup> Nor are there any good reasons to accept his views that the formulation of the fighting code is later than the

<sup>78</sup> Hopkins, "Ruling Caste," p. 58.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> *Idem.*; cf. Hopkins, *Great Epic of India*, p. 375: Kṛṣṇa as a "moral *deus ex machina*."

<sup>81</sup> See Holtzmann, *Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, Vol. 1, p. 12; Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp. 11-12; Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 18. The notion that moral concepts are inappropriate to an heroic age is a widespread misconception also held influentially by H. Munro Chadwick and Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932, 1936, 1940), Vol. 1, pp. 74-78; Vol. 2, pp. 490-491, including discussion of the *Mahābhārata*; cf. Hiltbeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 44-48.



war (assuming, as he does, that the war is historical),<sup>82</sup> or that Kṛṣṇa's role is a late importation designed to smooth over rough edges. It is easy to see that, working from such a model, Hopkins could find many opportunities to judge passages as interpolations. The resultant verdicts are based not only on a lopsided view of the history of Indian ethics, but more generally on the erroneous notion, shared with Max Müller and so many others, that the Indian mind was incapable of maintaining the clarity and "simplicity" of its so-called "original" religious insights. As Hopkins puts it: the priestly revisers did not invert the story but "blurred the picture where it was too suggestive of evil in would-be types of holiness."<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, the epic poets examine every moral tangle minutely and from every perspective imaginable.

During and immediately following what we may call the Hopkins years, *Mahābhārata* studies declined. "Analysis," it would seem, served only to intimidate scholars and prevent them from seeing the work comprehensively. And, by its piecemeal approach, it further encouraged a tendency to forget the Kṛṣṇa of the epic narrative and account for him by fanciful notions of his origins. As these views touch only rarely on the *Mahābhārata*, I will present them (along with some earlier assessments) only for the mélange of contradictions which indeed they are.

Thus Kṛṣṇa is originally a *kuladevatā* ( "ethnic god" ),<sup>84</sup> the sun,<sup>85</sup> and a vegetation spirit;<sup>86</sup> and where he is presented in human form alone ( as in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.17.6 ), this is the result of "euhemerization."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See Hopkins, "Ruling Caste," pp. 227-228: "the Epic came before the law." The "history" behind the epic is said to have been tampered with twice: (1) the war was backdated to identify the Pāṇḍava upstarts with the prestige of the "Brāhmaṇic" dynasties of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Janamejaya; and (2) the two sides were made cousins — "the latest audacity of the priests," designed to sanction the upstarts ( *ibid.*, p. 69, n. 1 ).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>84</sup> Auguste Barth, *The Religions of India*, J. Wood, trans. (original French ed. 1879; 4th ed.; Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963 ), p. 68.

<sup>85</sup> Barth, *Religions of India*, pp. 166 and 172; J. Kennedy, "The Child Kṛṣṇa, Christianity, and the Gujars," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* ( henceforth *JRAS* ) ( 1907 ), pp. 961-964; see also Ludwig, discussed above, who at least tried to relate the solar hypothesis to the epic story.

<sup>86</sup> A. B. Keith, "The Child Kṛṣṇa," *JRAS* ( 1908 ), p. 171; Keith, review of Nicol Macnicol's *Indian Theism JRAS* ( 1915 ), p. 841; Nicol Macnicol, "The Origin of the Kṛṣṇa Cult," *JRAS* ( 1913 ), pp. 146-151.

<sup>87</sup> One cannot, of course, be sure that this Upaniṣadic passage refers to the same Kṛṣṇa Devakīputra; if it does, the following agree that it must be a euhemerization. Barth, *Religions of India*, p. 168; Max Müller, trans., *The Upanishads*, "Sacred Books of the East," Vol. 1 ( Oxford, 1879; repr. Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1969 ), p. 52, n. 1; A. A. Macdonell and A. B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* ( 2 Vols.; 1912; repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967 ), p. 184; Keith, review of G. F. Moore's *History of Religions*, *JRAS* ( 1915 ), p. 548.

Or, on the contrary, he was originally a religious pupil and later a teacher whose doctrines are preserved primarily in the *Chāndogya* and in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,<sup>88</sup> all the rest being "rank growth of legend."<sup>89</sup> On this and several other grounds, criteria are drawn up for splitting the "composite" Kṛṣṇa into several separate identities. On the historical side, the Rājput hero, the "Furst," is regarded as more credible than the religious founder, the "Religionsstifter";<sup>90</sup> and along with this, as Hopkins and others had claimed, Kṛṣṇa shows the most humanity and historicity at his weakest moments, especially in dealing with Jarāsandha.<sup>91</sup> Added to the presumed historical kernel, then, are four "religious streams of thought": "... one flowing from Viṣṇu, the Vedic god at its source, another from Nārāyaṇa, the cosmic and philosophic god, [ a ] third from Vāsudeva, the historical god" (a sort of deified warrior-savant), and a fourth from Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, the cowherd god of the Ābhīras.<sup>92</sup> Although such analyses are plausible,<sup>93</sup> their authors show a favouritism for fragmentary evidence and the *argumentum ex silentio*, and a disinclination to examine what unites these figures (perhaps even including Kṛṣṇa Gopāla<sup>94</sup>) in the epic, the first text to tell "their" story.

<sup>88</sup> See Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism* (cited above, n. 14), pp. 9, 34-36; W. Douglas P. Hill, trans., *The Bhagavadgītā* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 5-6; and Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Sect* (2nd revised ed.; Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1936), pp. 39, 57-58; 79-91; although fascinating as detective work, these theories have been viewed with justifiable skepticism by the epic scholar S. K. De (editor of the *Draṇaparvan* for the Critical Edition) in his "Vedic and Epic Kṛṣṇa," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 18 (1942), pp. 297-300; in reply, see Bimanbehari Majumdar, *Kṛṣṇa in History and Legend* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1969), pp. 2-4.

<sup>89</sup> Raychaudhuri, *Materials*, p. 39.

<sup>90</sup> Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata* (cited above, n. 35), p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> See below, discussion on of Walter Ruben.

<sup>92</sup> Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism*, pp. 35-38; on the Ābhīra hypothesis, much has been said but connections remain only tentative. See most recently Bhagwansingh Suryavanshi, *The Abhiras: Their History and Culture* (Baroda: University of Baroda, 1962), pp. 17-18, 58-80; Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), pp. 80-85.

<sup>93</sup> Along these lines, see above at n. 14 on the Vasudeva-Vāsudeva "problem," and also Raychaudhuri *Materials*, pp. 18, 35-37; Kennedy, "The Child Kṛṣṇa" pp. 961-964; Franklin Edgerton, trans., *The Bhagavad Gītā Translated and Interpreted*, Harvard Oriental Series, Vols. 38 and 39 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), Vol. 2, pp. 30-33. For a rejection of multiple origins, see A. D. Pusalker, *Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), pp. 96 and 109.

<sup>94</sup> Sadashiva L. Katre, citing *Mbh.* 5.7.16 and 1.213.17 correctly warns that the Critical Edition will not prove that Kṛṣṇa's connection with the Gopas and Gopīs is

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They never recognize that a hero, as a type, is not necessarily reducible to either myth or history. And divinity and humanity are kept as the only possible categories by upholding the axiomatic view that the Vedic Viṣṇu has only a late and either fortuitous or strategically motivated sectarian relationship with Kṛṣṇa,<sup>95</sup> or even the view that the original historic tale had nothing to do with Kṛṣṇa at all.<sup>96</sup>

In the one exception to these "analytic" tendencies, a short but important article by Sylvain Lévi,<sup>97</sup> some of these centrifugal tendencies are opposed. In Lévi we see a reaction to the fragmentation of Kṛṣṇa's identity and his removal from the "original" epic, and the first real insistence on what we might call Kṛṣṇa's central importance. Although most of Lévi's arguments to this effect cannot be sustained today, it is worth examining the path he took to his conclusions. Each book of the epic, he notes, begins with a uniform prefatory benediction, which he translates : " In adoring Nārāyaṇa, and Nara the best of males, and the goddess Sarasvatī, may one make victory spring therefrom."<sup>98</sup> In fact, this benediction is found in only a few recensions, and the Critical Edition invariably omits it. Nevertheless, it does suggest correlations with other formulae and the patterns in the epic. The pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa is identified with the pair Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa, and for Lévi, this identity :

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interpolated or "late" : " Kṛṣṇa, Gopas, Gopis, and Rādhā," in H. L. Hariyappa and M. M. Patkar, eds., *Professor P. K. Gode Commemoration Volume* ( Poona : Oriental Book Agency, 1960 ), Part 3, pp. 83-85. See also Majumdar, *Kṛṣṇa in Legend and History*, pp. 49 and 57, who cites epic references to Kṛṣṇa's life with the cowherds, including the use of the name " Slayer of Keśi " ( Keśi was slain while Kṛṣṇa was a youth ) in *Bhagavad Gītā* 18. 1. From the standpoint of comparative mythology, a childhood in the country is a commonplace : e. g., Iranian Key Khosrow, Greek Paris, Roman Romulus, Britain's Arthur, Jesus of Nazareth, etc. The epic's allusions to Kṛṣṇa's childhood could be taken to indicate that the childhood legend was firmly established, but treated secondarily because of the epic's focus on Kṛṣṇa's adulthood. Madeleine Biardeau has indicated that she will argue for the " unity " of Kṛṣṇa from another angle.

<sup>95</sup> Barth, in *Religions of India*, pp. 166-167, and in his review of Dahlmann's *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, Part 3, p. 442, says it is Viṣṇu who gains by the epic's relatively recent association of him with the popular Kṛṣṇa; Kennedy, " The Child Kṛṣṇa," p. 974, proposed that Kṛṣṇa was not identified with Viṣṇu until the fifth century A. D. See also Raychaudhuri, *Materials*, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> See below, under discussion of Walter Ruben. Barth, review of Dahlmann's *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, Part 3, p. 443, also sees this as a reasonable possibility, as does Hopkins, *Great Epic of India*, p. 385, but both are non-committal.

<sup>97</sup> Sylvain Lévi, " Tato Jayam Udirayet," trans. L. G. Khare, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* ( henceforth cited *ABORI* ) 1 ( 1918-1919 ), pp. 13-20-

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

immediately evokes another formula ... which runs throughout the whole poem, which expresses all its inspiration, and which even now subsists in the conscience of India as the highest lesson of the Mahābhārata : namely, *yataḥ kṛṣṇas tato jayaḥ* [ “ where Kṛṣṇa is, there is victory ” ] ... In several instances this formula is supplemented by another analogous formula : *yato dharmaḥ tataḥ kṛṣṇo* [ “ where *dharma* is, there is Kṛṣṇa ” ], and the two are in turn combined ... from which results the formula *yato dharmaḥ tato jayaḥ* [ “ where *dharma* is, there is victory ” ].<sup>99</sup>

Formulae like these are viewed by Lévi as summaries of doctrine, and he insists that the epic is justly called the Fifth Veda, and even the Kāṛṣṇa Veda ( “ Veda of Kṛṣṇa ” ), “ because it preaches to the kṣatriyas the cult of Kṛṣṇa as a guarantee of success and welfare.”<sup>100</sup> It seems to me, however, that somewhat like Dahlmann, Lévi places too much emphasis on the “ didactic ” elements of the epic, and we must agree with Held’s criticism, that “ the epic not only teaches but also tells.”<sup>101</sup> Kṛṣṇa is not only the mouth-piece and symbol for a doctrine, but an actor in a drama. In this connection, when Lévi claims that the *Gītā* is “ the very heart and kernel of the work,”<sup>102</sup> we must be reserved in our appreciation : if there is truth in this statement, it lies not in the *Gītā* being a kṣatriya tract, but in its place and dramatic power within the epic’s structure.<sup>103</sup>

### C. *Ethnological Approaches*

This period of fragmentary and impressionistic researches lasted until epic study was able to take stock of itself in the light of new and different perspectives. The first of these was ethnology. It is true, of course, that ethnological considerations, in particular concerning the Pāṇḍavas’ polyandry, had already been a major theme in some epic studies. But now a more informed ethnology was available to guide the hands of three highly original *Mahābhārata* scholars : Garrett Jan Held, Walter Ruben, and Charles Autran.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>99</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>100</sup> *Idem.*; Barth, review of Dahlmann’s *Epos und Rechtsbuch*, Part 2, p. 327, sees this as referring to Vyāsa, i. e., Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana – in my opinion the likely referent.

<sup>101</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Lévi, “ *Tato Jayam*,” p. 16.

<sup>103</sup> For my treatment of the *Gītā*’s centrality to the epic, and discussion of others’ views, see Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 114–120, especially p. 120, n. 21.

<sup>104</sup> See Held, *Ethnological Study* ( full citation, n. 2 ), pp. 106–107 on the lamentable failure of Sanskrit scholars to take note of ethnology before his time. I would note just one exception : J. Przyluski, “ Le prologue-cadre des mille et une nuits et le thème du *svayamvara*,” *Journal Asiatique* 205 ( 1924 ), pp. 101–137.

It is Held who begins such investigations with an attempt, basically, to interpret the epic story, which he regards as mythic,<sup>105</sup> by reference to what he finds to be its social, ritual, and cosmological correlatives. Much indebted to Durkheim and his school for the assumption of a social, ritualized basis for ideological and mythical expressions,<sup>106</sup> he sets as his first task the reconstruction of the social system which the *Mahābhārata*, he assumes, reflects. In particular, Held's theory is based upon and inspired by Marcel Mauss' conviction that "the *Mahābhārata* is the story of a tremendous potlatch."<sup>107</sup> Assuming, even as the foundation of the caste system, that ancient India knew a social organization based on moieties or dual phratries (e. g., the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas), and having recourse in a circulatory marriage system to a third group (e. g., the Yādavas),<sup>108</sup> Held draws several implications. First, there is a reciprocity between the two phratries in matters, on the one hand, of games and play (e. g., the *dyūta* or dice match; the *rājasūya* ceremony as "potlatch"), and, on the other hand, in situations of stress (e. g., the *yuddha*, war). In addition, there is the potential of the third group (e. g., Kṛṣṇa) for acting as a "mediator." One may say, at this point, that Held's structural identification of such "dual systems," with their epic parallels, is far more convincing than his efforts at historical and sociological reconstruction,<sup>109</sup> especially as the opposition between the Devas and Asuras – to which Held himself links that between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus – is at least Indo-Iranian.<sup>110</sup>

On the positive side, however, Held has elicited certain structural principles at work in the *Mahābhārata* which, while convincing, are not easily reduced to Indian sociological or historical models. The first of these (not in his order) has to do with the "phratries": "The purpose of the Pāṇḍavas practising deceit is to show that the Kauravas were really invincible

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<sup>105</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103–106 on Durkheim, and p. 142: "ritual and the cosmic order are practically identical."

<sup>107</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (1925; New York: Norton, 1967), p. 54.

<sup>108</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp. 58–59, 70. Stated briefly, he departs from Émile Senart's view that caste had developed from tribe (both being endogamous) and proposes that it emerged from clan (*ibid.*, pp. 40–43). Clan emphasis on status and rank would then eventually, especially when intensified with phratry exclusivism, have led the clans to become endogamous and harden into hierarchical castes (*ibid.*, pp. 83–84). This speculative theory has had not won adherents.

<sup>109</sup> Held, *ibid.*, pp. 83–84, attempts to locate the transition from clan to caste in the Brāhmaṇa period.

<sup>110</sup> Held mentions Iranian parallels (*ibid.*, p. 40), but feels that others had placed too much emphasis on Aryan phenomena (*ibid.*, pp. 51, 56).

in the *yuddha*. The deceit of the Kauravas – it follows immediately – is intended to show that the Pāṇḍavas were really invincible in the *dyūta*.<sup>111</sup> His tendency to historicize leads him to draw unwarranted implications from such structural principles: “the game of dice, at the time of the epic’s assuming its literary shape, had not yet lost its significance... of a potlatch ritual.”<sup>112</sup> But the structural explanation does have its merits. For one thing, Held has observed some important correlations between epic and myth: the phratry type relationship between the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas is like that between the Devas and Asuras. Moreover, the themes of trickery and complementarity that are common in both sets of rivalries have brought Held to focus clearly, for the first time,<sup>113</sup> on a symbolic link between the dice match and the war. It is in this context that he provides the first useful context within which to interpret the involvement of Kṛṣṇa in the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas’ sins. One may accept Held’s point that the two parties are *like* interdependent phratries, so that when either party practises deceit (the Kurus in the dice match, the Pāṇḍavas in the war) it is as much as to say that the opposite side is invincible.<sup>114</sup> The poets are thus not trying to cover anything up (Hopkins), but are rather exploring the subtleties and ambiguities of deceit, sin, honour, and virtue within the archaic dual structure. Kṛṣṇa, the mediator within this structure, is thus for Held a sort of Trickster-Culture Hero-Benefactor-Deceiver:

The great benefit redounding to the culture hero from the duplicity of his character is that he can look both ways at the same time. Krishna, being a culture hero, was given a sphere of action within the cosmic order between the two worlds of gods and men, acting in his capacity of conciliatory mediator for the Common Good of the citizens of both the sacred and profane world.<sup>115</sup>

The trickster identification is problematic, but mediation has proved a fruitful concept.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>112</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>113</sup> Ludwig had focused on a pattern here, but saw only sunlight; see above, at nn. 43–44.

<sup>114</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, p. 304.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183. See Walter Ruben, *Krishna: Konkordanz und Kommentar der Motive seines Heldenlebens*, Istanbul Schriften, No. 17 (Istanbul: n. p., 1944), p. 264. There is certainly something of the “trickster” in Kṛṣṇa just as there is in other Indo-European figures whose activities involve mediations between opposed parties: e. g., the Norse Loki, the Welsh Efnisien, the Irish Bricriu, the Norse Bruno (see below), and even the Greek Odysseus. But in all such cases one does violence to force the figures into the “trickster” mould.

In this same context, Held also made the first solid contribution to an understanding of the roles of Śiva and Viṣṇu in the epic structure. Held sees the circulatory system of the "clans" as lying not only behind the relationships of the heroes, but also behind the *trimūtri*.<sup>116</sup> Leaving aside his treatment of Brahmā's recession, he addresses himself to the paramount importance of Viṣṇu and Śiva in the "ritual" maintenance of the seasonal and cosmic rhythm :

They both preserve their own character, though they presuppose each other; the same relationship which exists among the phratries. One might say : Viṣṇu is the All-god, viewed from the side of life; Śiva the same, but viewed from the side of death.

Or : "Śiva is the god of the *samhāra*, Viṣṇu of the *sr̥ṣṭi*."<sup>117</sup> Madeleine Biardeau has recently developed some of these points far more fully, but Held was able to base a number of interesting suggestions upon them. Most convincingly, he was able to show similarities between the myth of the *amṛtamanthana*, the "Churning of the Ocean for Amṛta" and the "phratry" relationships of the epic narrative.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, it is likely that his discussion of the respective roles of the Devas, Asuras, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva in this myth did not go far enough.<sup>119</sup> And secondly, noticing Śiva's fondness for dicing in the scene where Indra finds him at play atop Mount Kailāsa with Pārvatī ( the myth of the "Five Former Indras" — *Mbh.* 1.189— which accounts for the births of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī ), he tries to show a connection between Rudra and the *sabhā*, the "gambling" and "assembly hall." For one thing, it is the *sabhā* that provides the scene where Śakuni ( whose name Held finds linked with Śiva ) defeats Yudhiṣṭhira at dice. Here again, although the evidence is fragmentary, it may be that Held has not gone far enough. Śiva's fondness for dice, and the roles of Śiva and Kṛṣṇa in what Held has perceived as the balanced scenes of the *dyūta*

<sup>116</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp. 160, 170, and especially 223–224; he also sees it as lying behind the circulatory relationship of the *gṛhas* ( p. 123 ).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221–222; see pp. 189–99, 219–20 concerning the seasons.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296; Śiva is linked with the Asuras and Kurus, Viṣṇu with the Devas and Pāṇḍavas; see p. 156, viewing the *amṛtamanthana* as connected with ancient fire drilling practices.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144; for instance, although the Critical Edition omits Śiva's swallowing the poison ( see *Mbh* 1,274\* in notes ), this famous task is easily assimilable to his role of receiving the last and frequently most dangerous share in the sacrifice. See more recently J. Bruce Long, "Life Out of Death : A Structural Analysis of the Myth of the 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk'," in Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Hinduism : New Essays in the History of Religions* ( Leiden : E. J. Brill, 1976 ), pp. 171–207.

and the *yuddha*, are both matters that have rewarded further investigation.<sup>120</sup>

With regard to Kṛṣṇa himself, however, Held has not advanced much on his insight into his tricksterish role as a mediator. For one thing, he has failed to see anything more than an episodic relation with Viṣṇu. He thus turns again to ethnological considerations to decipher Kṛṣṇa's original character. Most confusing is his discussion of the initiatory relationship of Kṛṣṇa (initiate) and Kāṁsa (initiator demon); Arjuna-Nara (initiate) and Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa (initiator who takes on his "terrible form" in the *Gītā*); Arjuna (initiate) and Śiva (initiator in *kirāta*, "woodsman," disguise), and Mārkaṇḍeya (initiate) and the child Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu ("divine initiate" and initiator). The upshot of all this is that "Arjuna is the ideal initiate, being one with and yet not the same as the god-initiate Kṛṣṇa"; and, moreover, that "Kṛṣṇa is the initiate and Rudra the initiating demon."<sup>121</sup> Even recognizing initiatory motifs in all these relationships, it is impossible to support the view that the epic presents such a coherent (?) pattern of initiatory themes. As Held sees it, he is attempting to move beyond the nature mythology interpretations of Kennedy and Keith. But it seems we must credit his own insight, that his "readers may object that we are doing the same thing as the old nature mythology, merely substituting initiation for moonphases."<sup>122</sup>

On the whole, however, Held's work is rich and stimulating, and the same may be said of that of Walter Ruben, a second beneficiary of ethnology who addresses himself to Kṛṣṇa first, and the epic second. Concerned in several studies to derive the sources of the Purāṇic story of Kṛṣṇa's youth, and even to reconstruct an "original text of the Kṛṣṇa epic,"<sup>123</sup> Ruben combined these interests with a most novel approach to the epic Kṛṣṇa in his *Krishna: konkordanz und Kommentar der Motive seines Heldenleben* (1944).<sup>124</sup>

Ruben assumes, first of all, that the kernel of the epic stories concerning Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas is historical: there probably was a Kuru-Pāṇḍava war at Kurukṣetra that was mythicized on the model of the Deva-

<sup>120</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, p. 318, n. 1, and pp. 235-240; he tries to show that originally the *sabhā* was placed outside the settlement and to the south (according to him, Śiva's domain; p. 216). For my own discussion of these matters, see Hiltebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 86-101.

<sup>121</sup> Held, *Ethnological Study*, pp. 183-186, 222.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-166.

<sup>123</sup> Walter Ruben, "On the Original Text of the Kṛṣṇa Epic," *A Volume of Eastern and Indian Studies in Honour of F. W. Thomas, New Indian Antiquary, Extra Series*, Vol. 1 (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1939), pp. 188-203; *idem*, "The Purāṇic Line of Heroes," *JRAS* (1941), pp. 247-256; 3 7-357.

<sup>124</sup> Full citation above, n. 115,



Asura conflict;<sup>125</sup> and there is, for him, the even more important probability of an historical background to one segment of the Kṛṣṇa story. This is the conflict of Kṛṣṇa and his people with king Jarāsandha of Magadha : an account presented in both epic and Purāṇic sources in which the events of chief interest concern Kṛṣṇa's humiliation at the hands of this great king, leading to his own and his people's ignominious flight from Mathurā to Dvārakā. How, asks Ruben like others before him,<sup>126</sup> could a story about so glorious a figure have so inglorious a feature unless, like Roland's death at Roncesvalles, it recorded an historic reality ? If one thinks that Kṛṣṇa's flight was invented to connect the Kṛṣṇa of Mathurā with the Kṛṣṇa of Dvārakā, surely a more ennobling transition could have been found. Moreover, in the " cyclopean walls " that remain among the ruins of Girivraja, Jarāsandha's city, Ruben sees a " connecting link " between archaeology and the Indian epic.<sup>127</sup>

But if there are historical roots,<sup>128</sup> these hardly make up the " whole story." First of all, it is to be noted that Ruben follows in the tradition of Lassen, Dahlmann, and Oldenberg<sup>129</sup> in supposing that the extant epic and Purāṇic accounts derive, and have been put together, from independent cycles of legends. With regard to the development of the Kṛṣṇa tradition, he posits three layers, each around historical kernels. First is the Mathurā-Braj cycle in which the conflicts with Kāṁsa and Jarāsandha are overlaid by various Märchen, such as the combats with animal demons and perhaps some of the Gopī stories, and by such " local sagas " as the episodes of lifting mount Govardhana and taming the Nāga Kāliya. Second is the Dvārakā complex in which more legendary material ( the Mucukunda, Syamantaka, and Pārijāta tree stories, the flooding of Dvārakā ), perhaps originally about a different hero, is grafted onto the story through the presumed historical link of Kṛṣṇa's just mentioned flight. And finally comes a fusion of these two cycles with the traditions of Hāstinapura – originally historical but also over-

<sup>125</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, pp. 7 and 50 : he compares the " great historical struggle " with those that lie behind the Greek, French, and Tibetan epics, and says this struggle was interpreted by Viṣṇu-theologians as a stage on which appear forms representing the eternal dualism between good and evil heroes.

<sup>126</sup> See discussion above of Hopkins, at n. 75, and also Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde*, Vol. I, Part 2, pp. 758 and 823; Holtzmann, *Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, Vol. 2, pp. 48-49; and Sadashiva L. Katre, " Kṛṣṇa and Jarāsandha," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 8 ( 1932 ), pp. 500-508, and *idem*, 9 ( 1933 ), pp. 854-865, especially the latter, pp. 854-860.

<sup>127</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, p. 137; see also pp. 6, 211-216.

<sup>128</sup> Ruben also suggests historical verisimilitude for Kāṁsa's invitation to Kṛṣṇa to come to Mathurā ( *ibid.*, pp. 117-118 ), and the story of Kālayavana as perhaps a memory of Alexander ( p. 142 ).

<sup>129</sup> Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, p. 42.

laid with Märchen material – concerning the Pāṇḍavas and Kurus and resulting in Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the battlefield ruses, the miracle at Draupdī's disrobing, etc.<sup>130</sup>

There are some important matters raised by this analysis. First, the notion of cycles is now made more precise by a comparative approach. Ruben's intention was to draw the major part of his comparative material from the Inner and Southeast Asian world, not from the Indo-European, whose importance for India he felt was overrated.<sup>131</sup> But in fact, the basis for most of his comparisons comes from primitive religions, and this, in my view, involves some over-stretching of the imagination. He notes, for instance, that the ancient battle between gods and demons is transposed onto the human plane in the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa* in order to enlarge the stage for the eternal dualistic drama of good versus evil. All this derives, he says, from a combination of two motifs: First the primitive opposition between dangerous spirits and those sent out to encounter them for crimes, and second, "der Seelenwanderungslehre oder ihrer auf die Götter bezüglichen Variante der Inkarnationen."<sup>132</sup> It is possible to compare these comments with Mircea Eliade's conception of the shamanic sources of epic poetry,<sup>133</sup> but in the present context one must insist that more immediate influences on these epic themes – such as Indo-Iranian dualism, *bhakti*, and the importance in Indian thought of homologies and "connections" — are not easily derivable from such primitive roots. A similar argument will pertain against Ruben's treatment of Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the Pāṇḍavas' sins. Moreover, the notion that each fragment of the epic and Purāṇic Kṛṣṇa stories can be isolated as an example of either historical survival, Märchen, "local saga," or Rococo Romanticism (the Gopī love story)<sup>134</sup> is a true magic wand in the author's hands. The end result is total atomization: Kṛṣṇa's Purāṇic biography is an accumulation of "Stoff,"<sup>135</sup> and his connection with the *Mahābhārata* is an accident.

This leads us to what is for our discussion Ruben's most important and challenging contention. The notion of independent legend cycles, now

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<sup>130</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, pp. 263–266; he also speaks of a fourth complex of Eastern traditions (p. 267): if there was an original cycle of Kṛṣṇa sagas, the present one, composed for peasants and pilgrims, is not it

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6; this position seems to run deepest in French Indology; compare Przyluski (above, n. 104), and Autran and Biarreau, discussed below.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>133</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, Vol. 76 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), pp. 213–214, 510.

<sup>134</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, p. 109.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 251, 263.

pushed to its extreme, gives us a *Mahābhārata* originally without Kṛṣṇa. Actually, Ruben was not the first to make this suggestion, but I have left my discussion of the Kṛṣṇaless epic until now because Ruben presents the argument more vigorously and more cleverly than his precursors.

Hermann Jacobi had first argued that the early Kṛṣṇa was the tribal hero of a lost epic poem, once quite "popular," of the Yādavas in Northern and Western India, before he was "introduced into the great national epic of the Bhāratas."<sup>136</sup> And Hermann Oldenberg had recorded it as his unavoidable impression (Eindruck) that Kṛṣṇa's *Sagenkreis* appears to be thoroughly distinct from that of the Bhāratas, an impression that he formulated in terms of Kṛṣṇa's "foreignness" (Fremdheit) with respect to the rest of the poem: "Not a fighting hero but a charioteer. A theosopher on the battlefield. Counsellor on things which could also come to pass without his counsel and where he is often present only for this purpose, to appease the doubtful on what would scarcely appear doubtful to high antiquity."<sup>137</sup> Oldenberg buttresses this impression with the observation that although we are aware of Kṛṣṇa everywhere in the poem, we encounter him (as a visitor to the Pāṇḍavas) in only eleven episodes.<sup>138</sup>

It is this matter which Ruben sets provocatively before us. The *Mahābhārata* strains our credulity, he says, in presenting us with a leading hero who does not stay where the action is, but must hasten eleven times from his city of Dvārakā and travel a distance of a thousand kilometers as the crow flies through the desert and along the rugged Aravalli mountain chain, in order to lend aid and comfort to the struggling Pāṇḍavas.<sup>139</sup> For Ruben, this shows the traces of an intermingling of the two originally independent cycles, even if it happened in an ancient time when men did not yet write epics.<sup>140</sup> And this is all the more evident when one considers the eleven episodes in which he does appear: each of his actions, says Ruben, could be omitted without injury to the poem in terms of content or style.<sup>141</sup>

While not mentioning all eleven episodes here, we may see how Ruben supports his point. In his first appearance, Kṛṣṇa comes to Draupadī's *svayamvara* not as a participant but as a spectator. Next, when he encourages Arjuna to marry Subhadrā, this is important only for the Kuru genealogy, not for the *Mahābhārata*. At the dice match, the turning

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<sup>136</sup> Hermann Jacobi, "Incarnation (Indian)," *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribners, 1924), Vol. 7, p. 195.

<sup>137</sup> Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>139</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, p. 282.

<sup>140</sup> *Idem*,

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

point (Wendepunkt) of the epic, Kṛṣṇa is not at hand. Then, in the events of the Rājasūya sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa is given the pretext to kill two of his own foes, Jarāsandha and Śiśupāla, both of whom are unimportant for the epic story ( "Der Bruderkrieg der Bhāratas hat nichts mit dem Kampf gegen Magadha zu tun" ). As the battle approaches, Kṛṣṇa's peace-seeking mission to the Kauravas is a pointless duplicate of the equally unproductive mission of Drupada's *putohita*. On the battlefield itself, Kṛṣṇa is once again a superfluous non-combatant. And so on.<sup>142</sup> In my view, it is not that Kṛṣṇa is non-essential, but that Ruben has missed what is essential in these episodes. For him, however : "Eine solche übersicht zeigt, dass die eigentliche Handlung des Mahābhārata in allen entscheidenden Ereignissen sich ohne Kṛṣṇa abspielt, bis auf die gross Schlacht, in der Kṛṣṇa aber nicht kämpft."<sup>143</sup> Thus we have an epic originally without Kṛṣṇa, one in which Indra was perhaps the heroes' god. It was then seized upon and transformed, in unascertainable political conditions sometime after 500 B.C. by an expanding Viṣṇuism.<sup>144</sup>

I have followed Ruben this closely because his arguments are clever and bold, and because his outline of the eleven episodes does delimit the range of discussion. But the conclusion is inescapable that Ruben's treatment is far more superficial than his Kṛṣṇa. Once again, no significant connection is seen between the epic Kṛṣṇa and the Vedic Viṣṇu. But most important, the measure for Kṛṣṇa's relevance seems to be a notion that the original epic concerned just the war and the events leading up to it.<sup>145</sup> Thus, when he argues that Kṛṣṇa is non-essential, one whole skein of incidents in which Kṛṣṇa is involved – the marriage of Arjuna and Subhadrā, the birth, wedding, and death of their son Abhimanyu, the opposition to Aśvatthāman and the consequent death and revival of Abhimanyu's son Parikṣit – is robbed of and denied significance. I have tried to show that not only are these particular episodes significant, but that Kṛṣṇa's role is essential, or at least coherent and meaningful, in these episodes – including even his absences – as well.<sup>146</sup>

Ruben's efforts to reconstruct an original Kṛṣṇaless epic have also led

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>144</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>145</sup> It is an old foundationless notion that the original epic must have ended with the close of the war; see Holtzmann, *Indische Sagen*, 2, p. vii; Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature* (above, n. 46), vol. 1, pp. 324-325; Charles Autran, *L'épopée indoue : étude de l'arrière-fonds ethnographique et religieux* (Paris : Editions Danoël, 1946), p. 27; de Vries, *Heroic Song*, p. 103.

<sup>146</sup> For my treatment of Ruben on some of the relevant points discussed above, see Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 17, 79-85, 86-101.

him to discuss Kṛṣṇa's involvements in the Pāṇḍavas' sins on the battlefield. The original story, he suggests, may have omitted many of these killing scenes, which he identifies as examples of widespread folkloric motifs.<sup>147</sup> And he points to the death of Śalya, slain by Yudhiṣṭhira "in just combat," as the one killing which – since Kṛṣṇa is not, according to Ruben, involved<sup>148</sup> – may (he is cautious) recall the oldest single battle of the original war. Actually, Ruben has underestimated Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the death of Śalya.<sup>149</sup> As to the general significance of these interpolated ruses constantly proposed by Kṛṣṇa, Ruben does have some instructive insights. He would, first of all, avoid the word "sins" altogether as, for him, the actions are folkloric in background and tone and thus "pre-moral" in their ethics.<sup>150</sup> And even where the epic holds them up against the light of knightly *dharma*, though "gemeinen Listen," they are still not sins as they can be justified by Kṛṣṇa's own standards in the *Bhagavad Gītā*: "Krishna nicht für seinen eigenen Nutzen gemein handelt, sondern stets für andere."<sup>151</sup> This insight is quite ingenious as far as it concerns Kṛṣṇa alone, but it does not eliminate the validity of the term "sin" for those whom he advises. And neither does the additional notion that Kṛṣṇa's behaviour reflects the attitudes of *Arthaśāstra* Realpolitik. To say that "Krishna gehört in die bewegte politische Zeit des Kautālya"<sup>152</sup> is to make the same mistake as Hopkins: to suppose that the sins (or ruses) can be explained by referring them to the moral outlook of a relatively recent period in Indian history, when in fact the structures in which these sins are articulated have survived through various periods.

As to Charles Autran's *L'épopée indoue*, our third specimen of an ethnological approach, we need not say very much since it says so little about Kṛṣṇa. We learn only that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna's alleged cult is testimony to the "cultes heroiques" which Autran places only as a relatively recent stage in the "prehistoric" development of the epic. The underlying stratum is the pre-Vedic and non-Aryan, "points d'eaux." *tīrthas*, first inhabited by Nāgas, which, according to Autran, form the source of all variety of

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<sup>147</sup> E. g. Bhīṣma's fall is interpreted through the widespread theme of telling how one may be killed (Ruben, *Krishna*, pp. 222–223), citing South American, North American, Old Turkic and Caucasus examples plus the story of Samson and Delilah! On Droṇa and Karṇa's deaths, see pp. 226–227, 229–230.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>149</sup> See Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, 266–271.

<sup>150</sup> Ruben, *Krishna*, pp. 257–258; it is certainly unconvincing to view Kṛṣṇa as a clever "giant killer" or "master servant" of fable. Kṛṣṇa "serves" one of two equal sides, and his ruses are not those of one who must triumph over all odds.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259; cf. 256.

“floraisons légendaires.”<sup>153</sup> There is much of interest here showing links between the Pāṇḍavas – both within the epic and in later adaptations – and Nāgas, *tīrthas*, etc.<sup>154</sup> But there is nothing that concerns their roles in the *Mahābhārata* story which, for Autran, forms only a “cadre” of subsidiary interest.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, his debt to the older ethnology of the *Mahābhārata* helps him to build a most fragile conclusion : that the Pāṇḍavas’ polyandry connects them not only with the Himalayas, but with the pervasive Himalayan and Nepalese *tīrtha* and Nāga cults.<sup>156</sup>

In all, such diverse perspectives and conclusions seem to suggest that although the *Mahābhārata* abounds in material of ethnological interest, its structure and drama are irreducible to any set of ethnologically derived formulae.<sup>157</sup> The common error seems to lie in a miscalculation of the significance of the heroes’ behaviour. It is unwarranted to extrapolate such *ethnic facts* as circulatory marriage systems, dual phratries, independent legend cycles, and polyandry from the themes of the epic story. Although there can be no doubt that non-Brahmanical traditions and practices are incorporated into the epic, it will not do to start an interpretation of the epic by taking them as one’s basis. The only reliable way to investigate them will be to determine how they are integrated into the structure of the Brahmanical epic itself.<sup>158</sup>

#### D. The Hindu Critic

When the various ethnological views join the others in the mixed basket of fruits offered up by the labours of western scholarship, one is likely to sense a need for an articulate Indian response. We are most fortunate that one was provided by none other than the guiding spirit and chief

<sup>153</sup> Autran, *L’épopée indoue* ( cited above, n. 145 ), pp. 53, 62, 64.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21 ( Arjuna’s affair with the Nāgī Ulūpi ); see also pp. 268–74, 382.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. He assumes the story has a historical base ( p. 10 ), a special type of chivalrous hero from an epic age of ca. 1600–1000 B. C. ( p. 262 ) having gradually been divinized.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274–276, 391; on a supposed Himalayan background, see Robert Shafer *Ethnography of Ancient India* ( Weisbaden : Otto Harrassowitz, 1954 ).

<sup>157</sup> Indeed, some rather untenable positions have been taken in “ethnology’s” name : see in addition to Shafer ( above, n. 156 ), Buddha Prakash, “Kṛṣṇa ( An Ethnological Study,” *Gode Commemoration Volume*, pp. 36–57, fancifully linking Kṛṣṇa with the Caspian region.

<sup>158</sup> For an exemplary study, see Madeleine Biardeau, “Brāhmanes et potiers,” *Annuaire de l’École Pratique Hautes Études* ( henceforth *EPHE*, Section des Sciences Religieuses, 79 ( 1971–72 ), pp. 31–55; see also Alf Hiltebeitel, “Sexuality and Sacrifice : Convergent Sub-currents in the Firewalking Cult of Draupadi” ( presently under a Journal’s consideration ), discussing the South Indian Draupadi cult which celebrates the *Mahābhārata* as its cult myth.

architect of the Poona Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, Vishnu S. Sukthankar himself, in his *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (1942, published 1957).<sup>159</sup> Summing up his own discussion of epic criticism up to Held,<sup>160</sup> Sukthankar makes three points: (1) other efforts have been arbitrary and based on flimsy arguments; they have neither (2) had their basis in the work itself nor (3) in the Indian tradition.<sup>161</sup> Granting point one and withholding comment on what is meant in point two,<sup>162</sup> it is the third matter that requires our attention. For, startling as it may be, there had up to this point been no real effort to place the *Mahābhārata* in the direct line of India's own *literate* religious tradition.

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<sup>159</sup> Cited above, n. 1. See also his "Epic Studies," Part 4, "The Bhṛguś and the Bhārata: A Text-Historical Study," *ABORI* 18 (1937), pp. 1-76, a clever bit of detective work producing an hypothesis followed up by Robert P. Goldman, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors: The Bhṛguś in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

There have, of course, been other studies of the epic by Indian authors, but few have interested themselves in contributing to the "critical" discussion: see N. K. Sidhanta, *The Heroic Age of India: A Comparative Study* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1930), following the comparative literature approach of the Chadwicks (cited above, n. 81); N. V. Thadani, *The Mystery of the Mahābhārata* (5 Vols.; Karachi, 1931-1935), in which the epic's "essence" is philosophical allegory (see Sukthankar's bemused summary, *Meaning of Mahābhārata*, pp. 26-28); P. N. Mullick, *The Mahābhārata as it Was, Is, and Shall Be* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1934); *idem*, *The Mahābhārata as a History and Drama* (Calcutta: Thacker and Spink, 1939), given to ramblings and *ex cathedra* pronouncements on social history and divine love; C. V. Vaidya, *The Mahābhārata: A Criticism* (Delhi: Meher Chand Lachhman Das, 1966), concerned basically with confirming historicity, as are most of the essays in S. N. Gupta and K. S. Ramchandran, eds., *Mahābhārata: Myth and Reality. Differing Views* (Delhi: Agam Prakashan, 1976); and R. V. Vaidya, *A Study of Mahābhārata: A Research* (Poona: A. V. Prakashan, 1967), in which astrology is the master key. On the widely conflicting results of astrological criticism, see A. D. Pusalker, *Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p. 106. A cautious examination of the development of the bardic tradition behind the *Mahābhārata* is also found in R. N. Dandekar, "The *Mahābhārata*: Origin and Growth," *University of Ceylon Review* 12 (1954), pp. 65-85, although the connection drawn between the epic war and the Vedic battle of the ten kings is speculative.

<sup>160</sup> Sukthankar quotes Held's summaries of others' views, but makes no mention of Held's own.

<sup>161</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 28; he says also that "they lack, as a rule, the sympathetic understanding that is necessary" (*ibid.*, p. 46).

<sup>162</sup> It seems that what is meant here is a criticism of those who based their views only on certain portions or aspects of the text. He feels that all too much energy has been wasted seeking an "original" core (*ibid.*, p. 31), and even argues (p. 86) that "the so-called 'interpolations' of the Āraṇyaka, Śānti, and Anuśāsana parvans ... must be regarded as forming an integral part of the original in its received form, which is in fact the only form known to us and of which we can be sure."

Sukthankar arranges his work under three headings, claiming that the *Mahābhārata* is developed along three deepening planes : the “mundane” or “empirical,” the “ethical,” and the “metaphysical.” In each case we must make clear what he means, but the important point is that on each plane Sukthankar offers a view of how we should appreciate the epic *from within* the Indian religious tradition.

First, by the mundane or empirical level, Sukthankar has reference to the way the epic poets have delineated and developed individual characters. Here, he says, the poets are like the “ancient ṛṣis” who were “interested in breaking the tangled knot of personality.”<sup>163</sup> The raveling and unraveling of character thus takes on the dimensions of the quest for *mokṣa* : it involves insight into the law of *karman* and consists, on the poet’s part, “in elucidating the history of souls.”<sup>164</sup>

In my view, it is not so far-fetched to compare the epic poets with the ancient ṛṣis (although presumably Sukthankar is talking more of Upaniṣadic than Vedic ṛṣis). Perhaps we might speak of a common method of proceeding from relationships – whether of divine powers, or psychological factors, or of heroic traits – to homologies and underlying identities.<sup>165</sup> But Sukthankar, in one of his debts to Dahlmann, finds the key to the epic characterizations in “consistency”<sup>166</sup> rather than ambiguity, and thus when he tries to modernize the ancient method with amateur psychological diagnoses, the plane becomes mundane indeed. To cite the most earthbound analysis, he tells us that the proverbially magnanimous Karṇa “had no true generosity of heart” but rather a calculated and postured generosity through which he sought to resolve his “frustration complex” at being abandoned at birth by his mother.<sup>167</sup>

Secondly, by the ethical plane Sukthankar has in mind not only the conflict between *dharma* and *adharma*, but what he calls the “cosmic background” against which these themes are projected. The doctrine of *avatāras* (e. g., as presented in *Bhagavad Gītā* 4, 7–8)<sup>168</sup> and incarnations is operative on all levels of characterization, and, as part of the cosmic drama, it

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>165</sup> See Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 39–43, 359–360.

<sup>166</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 44.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51; it is worth noting how arbitrary this tool of psychological analysis is by comparing Sukthankar’s portrayal of Bhīṣma as “the perfect man” (pp. 45–48) with Irawati Karve, *Yugānta : The End of an Epoch* (Poona : Deshmukh Prakashan, 1969), pp. 42–46 : a man callously indifferent to women and too old to justify his pretenses as a great fighter.

<sup>168</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 78.



is not be viewed as the result of interpolations.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, there are "points of contact between the Vedic and epic ideology":<sup>170</sup> the rivalry of the Devas and Asuras continues in that between the Pāṇḍavas and Kurus and between *dharma* and *adharma*; and, with regard to the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa, we have the first discussion – in some respects anticipating the contribution of Stig Wikander – of the manner in which, as a group, they incarnate gods who provide significant indexes to their characters.<sup>171</sup> All this wins agreement, but there are also points of difference. Like Dahlmann, Sukthankar sees narrative as a medium to "broadcast the message" of *dharma*,<sup>172</sup> and also like Dahlmann he tends to see *dharma* as a "fixed axis" around which the epic revolves<sup>173</sup> rather than (as I would put it) as a subtle moral fabric confronting characters on all sides with anomalies and moral tangles. Furthermore, once again there is a tendency to allegorize on the "battle of life" and to universalize (or update) it by reference to such conflicts as those between capitalists or users and their innocent victims.<sup>174</sup>

Lastly, there is the metaphysical plane, and it is here that Sukthankar makes his most serious and original contribution. This is the level beyond *dharma* and *adharma*, the level, "called variously Brahman, Ātman, or Paramātmān," of the "Ultimate Reality."<sup>175</sup> To appreciate the epic at its deepest level, then, one must appreciate its thematic ties to the Upaniṣads. Here, for one thing, he suggests some intriguing symbolic continuities. On the chariot, he says: "In the Upaniṣads, the individual soul is described as the rider in the chariot of the body, while Buddhi is the charioteer. This has been improved upon in the *Gītā*, where the individual soul is still the rider, but the role of the charioteer has been taken over by ... Kṛṣṇa."<sup>176</sup> And for Nara and Nārāyaṇa he offers an interesting interpretation, viewing a story in which Nara is active while Nārāyaṇa apparently looks on passively (*Mbh.* 5:94 – the Dambodbhava episode) as a "plebian version of the classic parable of the two birds... of whom one (*Jīvātman*) eats the sweet fruit while the other (*Paramātmān*) sits, in a pleased mood, silently looking on."<sup>177</sup> This may not solve the whole Nara-Nārāyaṇa problem,<sup>178</sup> but

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–65.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84, 89.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92–98

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112. On the chariot metaphor, see *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.3. 3–9; *Śvetāśvatara Up.* 2. 9; cf. *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Up.* 3. 8.

<sup>177</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, p. 100; see *Muṇḍaka Up.* 3. 1. 1–2 and *Śvetāśvatara Up.* 4. 6–7,

<sup>178</sup> The identity of Nara and Nārāyaṇa as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the epic opens an immense and largely unresolved series of problems; for the moment, see Hiltel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 67 and 257, with references,

taken with his comments on the charioteer, there is enough here to convince us that Upaniṣadic themes are a source to be reckoned with in interpreting epic symbols. Indeed, why should it be otherwise ? But the most important matter, hardly obscured in the two examples, concerns Kṛṣṇa. According to Sukthankar, following the great breakthroughs of the Upaniṣads :

Man became an introvert ; and the Almighty became a lonely prisoner in the heart-cell of the “ Yogi. ”

To galvanize this Internal Ruler ( Antaryāmin ) again into activity, the epic poets have made the daring . . . experiment of leading the king out of his Dark Chamber into broad daylight in order to expose him to the gaze of his disconsolate devotees, who are pining to behold him, to hear his voice, to see him act a part in his own drama. And this Internal ruler, as you must have guessed, is no other than Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the adored of many hearts and the anathema to the modern critics of the Mahābhārata.<sup>179</sup>

Kṛṣṇa, then, no matter what his likely historical basis,<sup>180</sup> is the Ātman reactivated.

Sukthankar has some good and instructive fun deriding the attempts of Western scholars to decipher Kṛṣṇa :

... .. eliminating the “ Kṛṣṇaite ” elements from the Mahābhārata was a not less serious operation than removing all the vital elements from the body of a living organism ; and ... consequently the residue would no more represent the “ original ” heroic poem than a mangled cadavre, lacking the vital elements, would represent the organism in its origin or infancy.<sup>181</sup>

Or again, satirically he asks : “ How could they [ “ European savants ” ] ... ever hope to penetrate this inscrutable mask of the unknowable pulling faces at them and enjoying their antics ? ”<sup>182</sup> For Sukthankar, Kṛṣṇa is “ a paradox, a riddle ”<sup>183</sup> whom the critic meets at the very centre of the epic, that is, in none other than its most central text, the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>184</sup> And whoever is to understand him must do as Arjuna did : “ in proportion as he understands his own Self, will man understand the Śrī Kṛṣṇa of the Mahābhārata. ”<sup>185</sup>

There is no doubt a rich, if devotional, hermeneutic here, but we must not overlook certain imbalances in Sukthankar's treatment of this utmost

<sup>179</sup> Sukthankar, *Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67; concerning historicity, cf. pp. 28, 35, 48, 121.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102, 115–120. <sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

metaphysical plane. First, although one sees some validity in his, and Sylvain Lévi's insistence on the centrality of the *Gītā*, and accepts the importance of stressing continuities from the Upaniṣads to the *Gītā*, one senses great exaggeration in the view that : " The *Gītā* is in fact the heart's heart of the Mahābhārata, and the Mahābhārata is a sort of necessary commentary on the *Gītā*. " <sup>186</sup> Secondly, he tends toward a one-sided view of Kṛṣṇa's relation to Arjuna, seeing it as the all-important key to a " carefully veiled allegory . . . [ involving ] the characterization of most of the dramatis personae. . . " <sup>187</sup> Not only is his allegorical interpretation subjective, <sup>188</sup> but, as we come to realize through Wikander and Georges Dumézil, the roots of many epic themes in pre-Upaniṣadic mythologies and concepts must involve us in understanding Kṛṣṇa's relations with other figures as well. One point in particular stands out in this connection : nowhere does Sukthankar see any necessity of mentioning Śiva. In a book dedicated to Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, this would seem to invite the charge of an unfortunate " sectarian " oversight.

It might be pointed out that another approach to the epic by an Indian scholar gives us a very different picture here. In her rich and delightful *Yugānta : The End of an Epoch*, despite a common concern for the " mundane " level of psychological motivations ( where she often conflicts with Sukthankar <sup>189</sup> ), Irawati Karve betrays an entirely different reaction to Kṛṣṇa : " an elusive personality " who " never touches one emotionally as do other figures in the great epic. " <sup>190</sup> Perhaps we may be forgiven for wondering, considering her assumption of an originally historical Kṛṣṇa divinized by the Ābhīras <sup>191</sup> and a casual reference to Śiva as " God, " <sup>192</sup> whether we don't have here another evaluation simply drawn from an alternative sectarian preference. The Kṛṣṇa who emerges in her work is thus " an extraordinary man " whose " great personal ambition " was to obtain a title, that of Vāsudeva. <sup>193</sup> This is not, of course, an effort to base our

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-108 : Dhṛtarāṣṭra = empirical ego, his sons = egocentric desires, Vidura = *buddhi*, Bhīṣma = tradition, memory, and so on.

<sup>189</sup> See above, n. 167, for citation. Karve's character portrayals sometimes take the form of what she calls *naroṭis* ( " a dry coconut shell, i. e. a worthless thing " — *Yugānta*, p. 129 ) in which she imagines the characters behind-the-scenes thoughts and emotions.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*; see above, n. 92.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196; she also assumes that Śiva's cult is older than Viṣṇu's in the epic ( p. 228 ).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199. On Vāsudeva, see above, nn. 14 and 93, and on Kṛṣṇa's rivalry for this " title " with Jarāsandha's former ally Vasudeva Paundraka ( *Mbh.* 2. 13. 17-19 ), see also Majumdar, *Kṛṣṇa in History and Legend*, pp. 119-122; Ruben, *Krishna*, pp. 204-206; Jaiswal, *Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism*, pp. 86-87.

criticism on so personal a point. But one does see that more balanced criteria are necessary to appreciate fully the full sweep of epic theology, mythology, legend, and tradition as they concern Kṛṣṇa's identity and his relations with other figures, heroic and divine.

#### E. *The Recent Period*

The modern period has certainly not resulted in a monolithic interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* that supersedes the views of the past. As I have stressed throughout this essay, many lessons and significant insights emerge from the study of earlier approaches. But epic research of the last thirty years has opened new ground in certain major areas.

First, the Poona Critical Edition of the text, begun under the aegis of Sukthankar, was completed during this period after his death. This is not the place to discuss the merits of the Critical Edition, which I regard to be many.<sup>194</sup> But one result of its publication is that new groundrules must be established for any effort to reconstruct the "original" story.<sup>195</sup> All previous efforts at reconstruction are exposed as entirely arbitrary. This is especially true of Ruben's efforts. Although two clearly devotionalized episodes are shown to be interpolated – Kṛṣṇa's appearances to rescue Draupadī, first at her disrobing, then from the embarrassment of not having enough food to feed Durvāsas and his ascetic companions<sup>196</sup> – a Kṛṣṇaless epic gains absolutely no support from the Critical Edition's reconstituted text.

A second area of new ground has been opened by archaeology. Since 1947, a number of the sites mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* have been excavated, with the discovery that from around 1000 to 500 B. C. they shared a common culture identified by a Painted Gray Ware and the first Indian use of iron. Probably they were the home of various Aryan tribal kingdoms, who in all likelihood knew some version of the epic story and passed it on through generations. But the occupants of these sites lived in mud wall huts. One cannot, in my opinion, deduce from such information the historicity

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<sup>194</sup> On this much debated issue, my rather straightforward position is discussed in my *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 14–15, and treated by way of illustration in my "The Burning of the Forest Myth," in *Hinduism: New Essays* (see above, n. 119), pp. 208–224.

<sup>195</sup> See Mary Carol Smith, "The Core of the Great Epic of India" (thesis: Harvard University, 1972); *idem*, "The *Mahābhārata*'s Core," *JAOS* 95 (1975), pp. 479–482.

<sup>196</sup> See Franklin Edgerton, ed., *Sabhāpravaṇ, Mahābhārata* (Poona Critical Edition), pp. xxvii–xxix; Vishnu S. Sukthankar, ed., *Āraṇyakaparvaṇ* (Poona Critical Edition), p. xiii, n. 1; and Hiltebeitel, "Burning of the Forest," pp. 221–222.

of the *Mahābhārata* war.<sup>197</sup> If the splendid palaces of the epic are works of the imagination, it is rather arbitrary to decide that the story isn't.

This brings us to the third area to be opened up in recent years. One may in a general sense use the term " structural " for this approach.<sup>198</sup> It has also been comparative, always involving the comparison of the *Mahābhārata* with other materials which can help to elucidate its structure. The focus has been on the epic's narrative structure and its relation to other traditional Indo-European and Indian religious structures, primarily in the areas of myth, epic, and ritual, though also on pertinent ethical and legal structures as well.

As we have seen, a mythical approach had only an abortive application by Alfred Ludwig with his solar mythology, an open sesame that has not been tried again except for an elegant but wholly arbitrary article by Lachhmi Dhar.<sup>199</sup> To be sure, various symbols and themes in the epic have been discussed, but the underlying frame of reference has been either generally ethnological ( Lassen, Held, Ruben ), allegorical,<sup>200</sup> or historical.<sup>201</sup>

<sup>197</sup> See B. B. Lal, " Excavation at Hastināpura and Other Explorations in the Upper Gangā and Sutlej Basins, 1950-52, " *Ancient India* 10-11 ( 1954-1955 ); J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans. and ed., *The Mahābhārata, I : The Book of the Beginning* ( Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1973 ), pp. 8-12; and the discussions in Gupta and Ramachandran, eds., *Mahābhārata : Myth and Reality* ( see above, n. 159 ).

<sup>198</sup> Not, however, in the specific sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structural method stresses binary oppositions.

<sup>199</sup> Lachhmi Dhar, " The Myth of the Five Husbands of Draupadī, " in Mohammad Shafi, ed., *Woolner Commemoration Volume ( In Memory of the Late Dr. A. C. Woolner )* ( Lahore : Mehar Chand Lachhman Das, 1940 ), pp. 311-316.

<sup>200</sup> Sukthankar, Thadani, and others. It is to be noted how Indian scholars are frequently drawn to this approach, one which can be traced back to Madhvācārya in his commentary, the *Tātparyanirṇayaaprārambhaḥ*.

<sup>201</sup> To my knowledge, no Indian scholar has seriously examined the relation of the epic to Indian myth and cult. When D. C. Sircar refers to the *Mahābhārata* war as a " myth " ( see Gupta and Ramachandran, *Mahābhārata : Myth and Reality*, p. 141 ), he uses the term in the sense of " false " or " fabricated " story, still insisting that some basic event of history lies behind it. The reaction of other Indian scholars in the same volume is consistently negative. The sense in which " myth " is used in this article makes no judgment on historicity, but, following Mircea Eliade, takes " myth " as " true story " in the sense that its truth lies in its expression of the ideals, values, theology, and cosmology of the people who live with it; see Eliade, *Myth and Reality* ( New York : Harper and Row, 1963 ), pp. 5-14. For an hypothesis to be significant, it is not enough to find a few facts that fit together. It must have explanatory and predictive value. But the historical hypothesis does not explain the *Mahābhārata* any more than the *Mahābhārata* explains a moment of Indian history. Nor does the text, and especially the story, generate predictive insights into Indian history. This applies to the arguments of van Buitenen on geopolitical alliances in the epic and on the coincidence of the names Porus and Paurava in Greek and epic sources. As van

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But the major breakthroughs have come from the examination of the *Mahābhārata* in connection with *religious* materials from traditions with which the epic is genetically and culturally related. The pertinent data thus comes not from primitive religions and diversified folklores (Ruben, Held), but from the religious traditions of India itself and from the comparative study of Indo-European mythology and ritual.

The starting point for this new orientation was Stig Wikander's insight that the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī "transpose" into human or heroic terms a mythic, apparently Indo-European theologem involving what Gorges Dumézil has called a "trifunctional" structure : (1) a sovereign level (Yudhiṣṭhira); (2) a warrior level (Bhīma and Arjuna); (3) a level concerned with breeding, agriculture, service, and other facets of productivity and general welfare (Nakula, Sahadeva); and (comprehensively) a "trivalent" feminine figure (Draupadī).<sup>202</sup> Many refinements have been made of this analysis, but the basic structure has become widely recognized. After arriving at this formulation, both Wikander and Dumézil hesitated before pushing the analysis deeper into other facets of the epic, but inevitably they took the plunge and tackled the question of Kṛṣṇa. Despite the incredibly varied and formidable coalition which they faced — consisting of Sörensen,<sup>203</sup> the younger Holtzmann, Dahlmann, Bhandarkar, Barth, Kennedy, Raychaudhuri, Jacobi, Hopkins, Oldenberg, Held, Ruben, Edgerton, and Karve<sup>204</sup> — and despite the total lack of allies,<sup>205</sup> they began the

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Buitenen admits regarding the latter two names, either could be a family or dynastic name, thus leaving only an infinitesimal likelihood that the figures mentioned are identical; see van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 1, pp. 8-12 (on alliances), and *idem*, 3 (1978; "Introduction" to *Udyogaparvan*), pp. 154-158 (on Porus and Paurava).

<sup>202</sup> See initially Stig Wikander, "Pāṇḍava-sagen och Mahābhāratas mytiska forutsättningar," *Religion och Bibel* 6 (1947), pp. 27-39; trans. by Georges Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus*, IV: *Explication de textes indiens et latins* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. 37-53; discussed and amplified, pp. 55-85.

<sup>203</sup> Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée. L'Idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968), p. 21, n. 1, quotes S. Sörensen, *Om Mahābhāratas Ställning iden Indiske Literatur* (1883), pp. 84-85, to the effect that Kṛṣṇa's incarnation of Viṣṇu differs from the other heroes' incarnations of other gods.

<sup>204</sup> See above, n. 2 (Holtzmann), n. 36 (Oldenberg), nn. 58-59 (Dahlmann), nn. 67-73 (Hopkins), n. 93 (Edgerton), n. 92 (Bhandarkar), n. 95 (Barth, Kennedy, Raychaudhuri), n. 121 (Held), nn. 142-144 (Ruben), n. 191 (Karve), and Jacobi, "Incarnationa (Indian)," p. 194.

<sup>205</sup> Only Sukthankar avoids stating or implying that Kṛṣṇa's connection with Viṣṇu is "late." But for him, Kṛṣṇa is more the incarnation of the Ātman than of Viṣṇu, and thus he presents no direct links between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu.

investigation of what Holtzmann called the "ungeheurliche Identification" of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu. Speaking of Kṛṣṇa as "none other than Viṣṇu incarnated," Dumézil sums up his ideas in a foot-note :

Cette phrase ne prétend pas régler l'immense faisceau de problèmes que pose le personnage de Kṛṣṇa dans le Mahābhārata. Mon sentiment est, certes, que beaucoup de ce qui est dit de lui s'explique suffisamment comme transposition de la mythologie d'un Viṣṇu archaïque, transposition de même forme et de même portée que celle qui a produit les Pāṇḍava à partir d'une liste archaïque des dieux fonctionnels. Mais bien entendu, Kṛṣṇa n'est seulement pas cela . . . .<sup>206</sup>

Dumézil thus suggests that the figures of the epic who are incarnations and transpositions, at an archaic level, of Vedic, para-Vedic, and pre-Vedic divinities, must be extended to include Kṛṣṇa in his relation to Viṣṇu.

This effort to understand the epic Kṛṣṇa meets Sukthankar's criticism by taking us deep into the Indian religious tradition, deeper than the Upaniṣads which he had imagined as the starting point, back to the Ṛg Veda and, beyond this, to the domain of the Indo-Europeans. Once again, as with Ludwig, Held, and others, we have an approach based on the notion that the epic is structured by myth, but here, for the first time, there is an effort to link Kṛṣṇa with what is known, mythologically (and ritually), about Viṣṇu. This, of course, involves a re-examination of the notion, shared by the whole coalition just cited and by countless others, that Viṣṇu is but a minor Vedic divinity who only becomes popular later, in the "late" epic. And here Dumézil draws support from two scholars who are elsewhere known for opposing him<sup>207</sup> : from Jan Gonda, who is incredibly, if I am right, the first to insist on a continuity between the Ṛg Vedic relationship of Viṣṇu and Indra and the epic relationship of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna;<sup>208</sup> and from F. B. J. Kuiper who speaks of Viṣṇu's "centrality" in certain Vedic conceptions being recapitulated in Kṛṣṇa's centrality in the epic.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée*, 2 : *Types épiques indo-européens : un héros, un sorcier, un roi* ( Paris ; Gallimard, 1971 ). p. 60, n. 1.

<sup>207</sup> F. B. J. Kuiper, "Some Observations on Dumézil's Theory ( with Reference to Professor Frye's Article )," *Numen* 8 ( 1961 ), pp. 34-45; J. Gonda, "Some Observations on Dumézil's Views of Indo-European Mythology," *Mnemosyne* 4 ( 1960 ), pp. 1-15; *idem*, "Dumézil's Tripartite Ideology : Some Critical Observations," *Journal of Asian Studies* 34 ( 1974 ), pp. 139-149.

<sup>208</sup> Jan Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* ( 1954; repr. Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1969 ), pp. 159-161.

<sup>209</sup> F. B. J. Kuiper, "The Three Strides of Viṣṇu," in Ernest Bender, ed., *Indological Studies in Honor of W. Norman Brown* ( New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1962 ), especially pp. 243-245, 250.

Once it is established that there is a fundamental and essential relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu, it is not just Vedic traditions concerning Viṣṇu (and related traditions from other Indo-European religions) that inform us about Kṛṣṇa, but other, more recent Indian traditions as well. Here it is Madeleine Biardeau's explorations of Purāṇic mythology and cult that shed considerable light on many points concerning Kṛṣṇa and the epic.<sup>210</sup> Although there are important differences between understanding the epic Kṛṣṇa primarily through early Vedic and "extra-Indian" themes connected with Viṣṇu, or through the more recent Purāṇic traditions about him, there is much basic agreement in terms of method. The epic must be seen in its correlation with a whole mythology; and, as to Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu, it is not just on themselves, but on their relation to the other figures in this whole mythological and ritual structure that recent scholarship has focused.

In brief, this structural myth-and-ritual approach has located two main areas of mutually enriching study. As I have summarized elsewhere,<sup>211</sup> Wikander, Dumézil, Biardeau, and I have argued that the *Mahābhārata* battle involves a transposition into epic of eschatological myth. Heino Gehrts,<sup>212</sup> Biardeau, and I have also examined the narrative for the dramatization of themes from ritual. As to the first approach, Wikander, Dumézil, and I have in one way or another identified the background myth as Indo-European, with its closest analogues in the "dualistic" eschatologies of ancient Iran and Scandinavia.<sup>213</sup> Biardeau, on the other hand, has argued

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<sup>210</sup> See Madeleine Biardeau, "Études de mythologie hindoue," Parts 1-3, "Cosmogonies purāṇiques," Parts 4-5, "Bhakti et avatāra," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* 54 (1968), pp. 19-54; 55 (1969), pp. 59-96, with "Appendice : Contribution à l'étude du mythe-cadre du *Mahābhārata*," pp. 97-105; 58 (1971), pp. 17-39 (on the *pralaya*); 63 (1976), pp. 111-262; 65 (1978), pp. 87-238 (in these last two, from p. 203 of the first onward: "Le *Mahābhārata* comme unité mythique"); the comptes-rendus of her Sorbonne courses, *EPHE* (see above, n. 158) 77 (1969-70), pp. 168-173; 78 (1970-71), pp. 151-161; 79 (1971-72), pp. 139-146; 82 (1973-74), 89-101; 83 (1974-75), pp. 103-111; 84 (1975-76), pp. 165-186; "The Story of Arjuna Kārtavīrya Without Reconstruction," *Purāṇa* 12 (1970), pp. 286-303; "Narasimha, Mythe et Culte" and "Narasimha et ses sanctuaires," *Puruṣārtha* 1 (1975), pp. 31-48, 49-66; *Olefs pour la pensée hindoue* (Paris : Editions Seghers, 1972); *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1976); "Brāhmaṇes et potiers" (see above, n. 158).

<sup>211</sup> Hildebeitel, "Mahābhārata," *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* (Nashville : Abingdon Press, to appear ca. 1981).

<sup>212</sup> Heino Gehrts, *Mahābhārata : Das Geschehen und seine Bedeutung* (Bonn : Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1975).

<sup>213</sup> Wikander, "Från Brävalla till Kuruksetra," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 75 (1960), pp. 183-193; *idem*, "Germanische und Indo-Iranische Eschatologie," *Kairos* 2 (1960), pp. 83-88; Dumézil, *Les dieux des Germains : essai sur la*

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that the eschatological myth which structures the battle is the Hindu myth of the *pralaya* or cosmic "dissolution."<sup>214</sup> As to ritual models, J. A. B. van Buitenen has demonstrated that the epic's second book, which includes Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration and the dice match, is modelled on the structure of the Rājasūya ( Royal Consecration ) sacrifice.<sup>215</sup> Gehrts has pushed this notion to include the whole *Mahābhārata* as an extended Rājasūya ( see n. 212 ). While this particular claim is, I feel,<sup>216</sup> far-fetched, his views converge with Biardeau's and mine that the battle itself is, in a most significant sense, a " sacrifice of weapons " or " sacrifice of battle " ( *śastrayajña, yuddhayajña, raṇayajña* ).<sup>217</sup>

The examination of the *Mahābhārata*'s relation to myth and to ( primarily Brāhmanic ) ritual, and the recognition of Kṛṣṇa's *significant* connections with Viṣṇu have thus led to many important insights. In fact, it was not until it was seen that Kṛṣṇa's role had to be studied in relation to the epic's other mythic themes that the " structural " study of the epic could mature. For as Sukthankar so correctly saw, Kṛṣṇa's place in any interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* is central.

Without attempting an in-depth analysis of the positions recent scholars have taken, and without detailing my own efforts at contribution to the discussion other than referring to my work in foot-notes, let me conclude with a brief overview of what has been offered on the subject of Kṛṣṇa from within this general methodological perspective.<sup>218</sup>

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*formation de la religion scandinave* ( Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1959 ), pp. 78-105 ( translated in Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, trans. and ed. by Einar Haugen [ Los Angeles : University of California, 1973 ] ); *idem*, *Mythe et épopée. L'idéologie*, pp. 208-237; Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 209-353; see also Steven O'Brien, " Indo European Eschatology : A Model, " *Indo-Iranian Journal* 4 ( 1976 ), pp. 295-320.

<sup>214</sup> See above, n. 210, especially " Études de mythologie, " Parts 3 and 4.

<sup>215</sup> van Buitenen, " On the Structure of the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata, " in *India Maior* ( Festschrift Jan Gonda ) ( 1972 ), pp. 68-84; *idem*, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 2, pp. 3-30.

<sup>216</sup> For a critical review of Gehrts's work, see Hildebeitel, review of Gehrts, *Erasmus* 29 ( 1977 ) columns 86-91; more favourably, see Biardeau's review in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18 ( 1976 ), pp. 124-127.

<sup>217</sup> Several passages use these terms ; see Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 15, 318.

<sup>218</sup> I omit van Buitenen, for despite some major structural insights ( see above, n. 215 ), he continues to advance a historicistic position ( as regards Kṛṣṇa, see *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 2, pp. 14-21 ) that deemphasizes and even trivializes myth. See *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 3, pp. 142-154 for a critique of Dumézil and Biardeau, and O'Flaherty's review ( cited n. 1 ), especially p. 25, on van Buitenen's " frank " impatience with myth.

Dumézil was the first to investigate the question. In a series of articles, he focused on the transposition of the Indo-European theme of a priest (Roman) or god taking three steps to open a new territory for conquest. In the *Ṛg Veda*, the theme of the three steps is of course identified with Viṣṇu, and Dumézil saw it transposed on to Kṛṣṇa in the scene where Kṛṣṇa must three times (the first two by stepping forth dramatically from their chariot) urge Arjuna to fight Bhīṣma. Dumézil also approached Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the war, his opposition to Aśvatthāman (whom Śiva "possesses"), and his revival of Abhimanyu's son Parīkṣit as the transposition of a myth of destruction and rebirth. Here he sought to differentiate, however, between an earlier level of the story (dice match, battle, restoration of Yudhiṣṭhira), with parallels to the Norse myth of the end of the world, and a later level concerned with specifically Indian theologies and mythologies of Viṣṇu and Śiva.<sup>219</sup>

Wikander approached the matter from a different angle, taking up the question first and foremost from the standpoint of comparative *epic*. Amidst the altogether startling and compelling analogies he found between the Norse story of the Battle of Brávellir and the main narrative of the *Mahābhārata*,<sup>220</sup> one of the most intriguing concerns Kṛṣṇa. As Wikander observes, both the stories of Kṛṣṇa and Bruno involve gods (Odinn in the Norse account) in human form who sow strife as ambassadors, serve as charioteers, reveal their divinity to their chariot companion, intervene in the battle with ambiguous maneuvers, and secure the victory for the side they favour.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> See Dumézil, "Viṣṇu et les Marut a' travers la reforme zoroastrienne," *Journal Asiatique* 241 (1953), especially pp. 7-18; "Les pas de Kṛṣṇa et l'exploit d'Arjuna," *Orientalia Suecana* 5 (1956), pp. 183-188; "Remarques sur le ius fetiale," *Revue des Études Latines* 34 (1956), especially pp. 102-108; "Le dieu scandinave Vidarr," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 218 (1965), pp. 1-13; *Mythe et épopée. L'Idéologie*, pp. 96-98, 120-122, 208-240; *Idées romaines* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969), pp. 61-78; *Mythe et épopée*, 2, especially pp. 55-116. On eschatology, see above, n. 213. The particular "three step" theme I have also examined: Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 114-140. In a letter to me, Professor Dumézil spoke of Kṛṣṇa as "inépuisable".

<sup>220</sup> See above, n. 213, for Wikander's two articles on the subject, and Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 58-59, 109-113, and 276 for some further discussion. The major parallels are (1) a dynastic crisis shaped by similar incidents through four generations, culminating in (2) a war between forces headed by a blind old king (Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Haraldus Hyldetan) and those of his nephews, a war which the nephews cannot win until they eliminate (3) a great champion (Bhīṣma, Ubbo Frescius) by filling his body full of arrows by a treacherous design. There are other specifics that would require much fuller discussion than is possible here, especially as regards point 1.

<sup>221</sup> Wikander, "Från Bråvalla," pp. 184, 189; see my *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 111-112: Bruno means "Brown," perhaps another link with the "black" Kṛṣṇa.

Wikander thus widens the investigation by pushing it to its remotest *possibility* : the relation between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu corresponds to a piece of Indo-European *epic* that may, even in a pre-Indian form, have involved a theology of incarnation.<sup>222</sup>

Biardeau, stimulated by Dumézil's work to begin her own epic research, has undertaken to examine the *Mahābhārata* in relation to specifically Indian traditions. She goes well beyond the hints proffered by Dumézil that the opposition between Kṛṣṇa and Aśvatthāman presents a transposition of Hindu themes concerning Viṣṇu and Śiva. For her, the *Mahābhārata* is a transposition of the Hindu myth of the *pralaya* and recreation (*śṛṣṭi*, *pratisarga*) of the universe. The *pralaya* myth coincides and integrates with the myth of *avatarāṇa*, making the epic essentially an *avatāra* "myth." The epic heroes are thus regarded as figures symbolizing various aspects of the synthesis of *pralaya* and *avatāra* mythologies. Among the most notable insights, Biardeau has shown that the theme of *avatarāṇa* does not simply concern a one-to-one relation between two figures – e. g., Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa – but the incarnation and thus activation of figures who represent the mainstays of the entire pantheon :<sup>223</sup> a female figure ( Draupadī ) who represents the Goddess and the Earth, figures who represent the principles of the *brahman* and the *kṣatra* and, to various ends, their unification ( Droṇa, Arjuna, Aśvatthāman ), figures who represent the complementarity in roles of the *avatāra* and the king ( Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa ), and figures who represent the theological interplay between Viṣṇu and Śiva ( Kṛṣṇa and Aśvatthāman ).<sup>224</sup>

Gehrts, with his focus on parallels between the *Mahābhārata* and the Rājasūya, has naturally not focused as directly on Kṛṣṇa as these other scholars, since Viṣṇu's place in the Rājasūya has nowhere near the high profile that Kṛṣṇa's does in the *Mahābhārata*. He thus proposes that concepts of Kṛṣṇa have in some cases changed beyond the original design of

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<sup>222</sup> As I discussed in *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 35-39, the world's epics present countless examples of heroes having demigod status, usually by paternity, possession, etc., but sometimes also by incarnation.

<sup>223</sup> See also Biardeau's discussion of the Rāma Dāśarathi, Paraśurāma, Vāmana, and Narasimha *avatāras* in "Etudes de mythologie," Part 4, pp. 171-203 and "Nar a simha, mythe et culte."

<sup>224</sup> See above, nn. 214 and 210. My main reservations have been that the *pralaya* mythology does not account for certain themes, e. g., the "dualistic" battle, and that the story is essentially *epic* (concerned directly with heroes and on "heroic age") rather than "myth" (concerned with gods and the destiny of the universe); see Hildebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 48-59 on the concept of the "heroic age," and 300-312, on Dumézil and Biardeau as regards their views on epicschatology.

the epic.<sup>225</sup> He does, however, like Biardeau stress Kṛṣṇa's relation to Arjuna, whom he sees as the key "king" figure among the Pāṇḍavas. For Gehrts, Kṛṣṇa embodies the spirit of ritualist solutions<sup>226</sup> which he sees as inherent in the many scenes where Kṛṣṇa advises the Pāṇḍavas to act outside the knightly code.<sup>227</sup>

Obviously there are differences in these views. In my own work I have tried to show that they are not, however, always irreconcilable. The project of examining the "structure" of the *Mahābhārata* has only begun, and refinements are to be expected. But something of the grandness of the epic emerges from the new study. For not only do we learn more about the epic from studying it in relation to other texts and traditions. We also learn more about these other traditions from studying them in relation to the *Mahābhārata*. Not only must Indo-European, Vedic, Brāhmaṇic, and Purāṇic traditions be examined further, but also other Indian materials — particularly legal texts, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the vernacular versions of the *Mahābhārata*, and the epic's connections with topography and local cults. The *Mahābhārata* is a living epic because of its place in Hinduism. The true challenge to interpretation is the appreciation of its continuing vitality.

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<sup>225</sup> Gehrts, *Mahābhārata*, p. 188.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 269–270.

<sup>227</sup> Gehrts's stress on Kṛṣṇa's connection with ritual solutions accords with my view that much of Kṛṣṇa's activity is modelled on the Viṣṇu of the Brāhmaṇas, texts in which Viṣṇu is commonly identified with the sacrifice itself. This has been the line I have followed in examining Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the Pāṇḍavas' sins; see *Ritual of Battle*, pp. 229–296.